

Sentimental Studies

&

A Set of
Village Tales



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Sentimental Studies

and

A Set of Village Tales

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To Harry,
in remembrance of
much encouragement.



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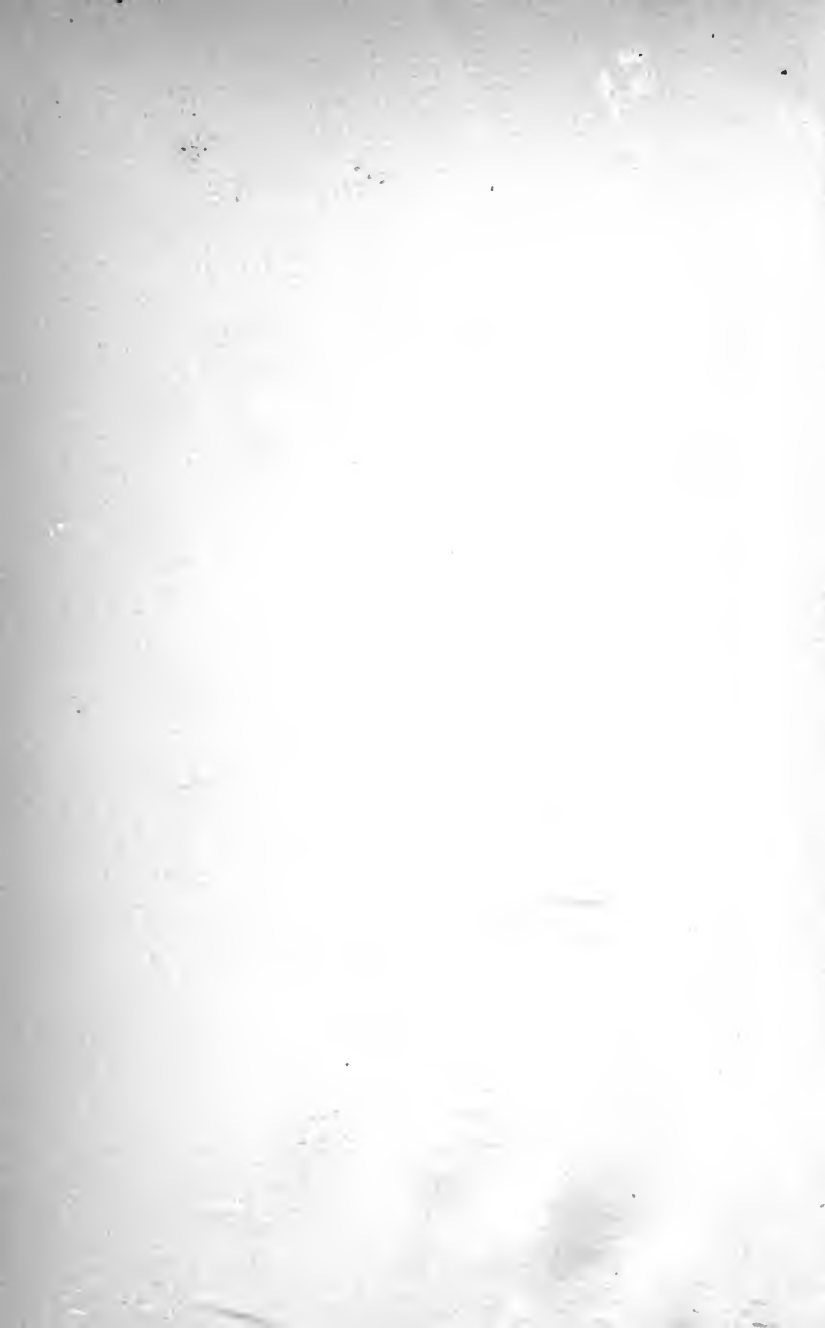
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Sentimental Studies



A COMMONPLACE CHAPTER.—I

I

THE two women stood by the door, face to face. Impulsively the elder one lifted her arms, caught the younger one to her, and kissed her.

"God bless you, my darling God bless you !"

The struggle to stifle the rising sobs made the words come irregularly, in gasps.

"There, there, mother dear," murmured the girl soothingly, while she smoothed the elder woman's hair. "There, there. You mustn't cry."

"No, no ; it's over now," the other answered hastily, lifting her face.

The girl brushed the tears from the wrinkled cheeks, and held them an instant between her hands, smiling encouragingly.

And the mother smiled back bravely. Once more she drew the girl to her and kissed her greedily.

"Good-night, Nell darling."

"Good-night, mother."

They looked into each other's eyes ; the girl still

smiling encouragingly; the mother still gulping with her grief.

Then the door shut gently.

Mechanically Ella knelt down by the bedside. The words of her habitual evening prayer rose to her lips :—

“Commit thy way unto the Lord ; trust also in Him, and He shall bring it to pass.”

When she had ceased she became aware that to-night she could not pray. She was alone. And she wondered not a little at this novel consciousness of solitude. For she remembered that it was for the last time.

All at once came a spasm of keen pain—tomorrow it would be all gone mother father the gables the chestnuts the clematis climbing the porch the yellow-legged writing-table in the study, and its litter of old circulars, ends of string, sealing-wax and disused pens all would be gone. She would be in a strange room, in a strange house, which she did not know.

And he would be with her.

Often, during the past fortnight, she had tried to realize that the end of the old life was coming ; but she had never known, as she knew to-night, that it meant separation from all that had seemed before an inseparable part of her existence. Every day they would sit down to breakfast, to luncheon, to dinner, without her ; they would live on, and she would not be there.

And, as she knelt, just for a moment, a rebellious longing rushed through her—a passionate yearning to say no—to remain, to be good and gentle and loving to them always, always.

“My queen, my divinity, there will be nothing in my life that is not yours; there will be nothing in your life that is not mine. Henceforth we shall live, each for the other, till death do us part, and the most glorious happiness that God has given will be ours.”

Those were his words. She remembered them, every one. Her eyes glistened; for the words sent her blood tingling.

“You are the whole world to me; there is only you, darling. I cannot live without you. I love you, I love you, I love you!”

. . . . It was where the path in the wood ends—leaves above, leaves around, nothing but leaves; not green, but black and white. Hillier’s face, clear cut in the white moonlight, his hands clasping her hands, his cheek pressing her cheek.

And it all seemed to her very wonderful and very grand.

She undressed rapidly, as she was accustomed to do; blew out the candle, and got into bed.

The window was wide open, and the muslin curtains swaying in the breeze bulged towards her, weirdly. She could see the orchard trees bathed in blackness, and above a square of sky, blue-grey, quivering with stifled light, flecked with a disorder of stars that seemed ready to rain upon the earth.

After a while, little by little, she distinguished the forms of the trees. Slowly, monstrous, and sleek, the yellow moon was rising.

She was no longer thinking of herself: she had forgotten that to-morrow was her wedding day: for a moment, quite impersonally, she watched the moonlight stealing through the trees.

When recollection returned, it was wrapped, as it were, in a veil of unreality. She had been insisting to herself that it was for her a great moment. Yet it had seemed, and to-night it seemed more so than ever, that, somehow, she was powerless to be present at this turning-point in her life; that as a spectator, on some great height, she was looking down on all that was happening to her. And the distance made things blurred

It was quite dark when she awoke. She supposed it was about two o'clock. Over there, in the inn opposite, Hillier—was he thinking of her, or was he asleep? No, she was sure that he was awake; eager, excited, impatient, as she was, waiting for the great, unknown happiness. The unknown happiness, of the existence of which, during the past few days, she found herself growing conscious—the unknown, which was to be mysterious and wonderful. Her breath came quickly, in the stillness of the dark she could hear it distinctly

To-morrow night he would be with her; she would sink to sleep, her head on his shoulder, his arm protecting her, and, when morning came, he

would cover her face with kisses, and he would tell her how he loved her

She imagined the first breakfast in the cottage which Hillier's uncle had lent him (away in Surrey ; it was a grey-coloured county in the school-room map). There was a bow window, and the sunshine streamed in, on to the white cloth. She sat at the bottom of the table ; she poured out his coffee, and she asked him how he liked it. Then they went out together through the glass doors—for there were glass doors in the bow window—and they walked round the garden, and she picked some flowers—dog-roses they were—and pinned them in his button-hole, and by-and-bye they went out into the pine-woods, where there was no sound, and where they were alone, quite alone.

* * * * *

He would be very good to her—she knew that—kind and unselfish, and loving. And she would be unselfish too ; she would follow him in everything ; he was so clever ; he meant some day to become a great writer, of whose name all the world knew.

How different he was from the rest of men ! She recalled two others of her acquaintance, and the consciousness of her pride filled her with joy.

Was God away in heaven, looking down on her, she wondered ? And she fell to remembering how, as a child, she used to lie staring straight up at the sky, trying to catch a glimpse of God in His glory, seated, surrounded by a shining multitude of

angels, somewhere amid the huge billows of white clouds.

Other fragments of her childhood memories came to her too, and some of them she turned over in her mind again and again, beginning each time at the same point, and ending each time where she had ended before. . . .

The sound of the hall clock striking in the hall woke her. How loud it seemed ! She felt wide awake and curiously calm. . . .

II

He was, he told himself, supremely happy. Several times before he had set up a woman's figure on a pedestal, and, for a while, had deluded himself into worshipping her. And when it had passed, he had, to his own satisfaction, succeeded in bedecking the memory of each incident with an appropriate, sentimental halo. He had had too, of course, erotic adventures, purely physical ; for he had lived, during his early years, in the unwholesome atmosphere of an expensive public school, and a precocious familiarity with the obscene had left upon his imagination a secret taint, which at moments had asserted itself irresistibly. Growing into manhood he had sinned conventionally with the rest ; but for such conduct he frequently professed a sentimental disgust, which, in his case, was more sincere than hypocritical. Yet, in a sense, he was proud of himself ; of his ability ; of his personal charm ; of his physical comeliness ; he looked back with pride on many events of his life ; on his struggle with poverty ; on his conquests of women. The waiting for achievement in his work had never caused him to experience doubt or discouragement ; and, when other men paraded these before him, he looked down on them with genuine

contempt. His conceit had been sufficiently robust to carry him through that time of struggle ; he believed that he had always known that he would not fail. He felt that he was self-satisfied, by reason of a definite gauging of his own powers. Indeed, there was but little perspective in his view of his life, so much of the foreground did his own figure fill.

* * * * *

During the past two years an unformulated discontent had been growing within him. More and more seldom did his thoughts revert to his past sentimental experiences. Their attractiveness seemed to have faded, like the colour of a much-fingered embroidery. He found that he no longer viewed his management of his own life with the same satisfaction, but rather with a sort of smouldering irritation. Something was wanting ; something was unachieved. The restlessness which this sense of void produced, resolved itself, last year, into a concentrated impatience for escape—immediate escape—from the groove in which his life was running. So he travelled alone to Switzerland, and there, during long evenings in drowsy Alpine villages, he started to dream of marriage—an ideal marriage—a simultaneous satisfaction of intellectual, emotional, and physical desires.

And, six months later, in that picturesque Sussex village, he had stumbled across the realization of his dreams.

The whole business was of a piece, he thought ; picturesque, yet in no way cheap.

And yet this moment of his marriage had stirred his inmost fibres with an impetuous yearning for regeneration. The manifestation of his love for her had been full of a refinement of fine impulse, of a tense and cultured aspiration. She, Ella, warm- and simple-hearted, sweet- and gentle-minded, during the fervour of their engagement trusted in him as a man above all other men ; and his very self-absorption made each fresh sign of this trust of hers an acute suffering to him, till, racked by remorse, he longed weakly to besmirch himself altogether in her eyes.

And this same morbid consciousness of the ignoble within him, the cultivation of which brought him a certain relief, since it seemed a final remnant of distinction with which he could bedeck the cloddish brutality of his past conduct, had spurred him to a strenuous devotion to her. He had effaced himself utterly: absorbed himself in her ; grown aglow with an ecstasy of passionate, reverential fervour.

For her personality appeared to him abundant in possibilities ; and it was—though he never acknowledged it to himself—on these possibilities, rather than on the obvious facts of her nature, that his imagination dwelt. That she might represent to him something entirely different from what he imagined her to represent, now, in this moment of extreme emotional exaltation, would have appeared to him quite preposterous.

Thus he adored her extravagantly, in unconscious

insincerity ; caressing admiringly the extravagance of his adoration ; or telling himself that he loved her with all the forces of his manhood ; because she was his, because he had found her, because he knew the great love she was giving him in return.

And he took to describing the relations of sex as a great sacrament.

Physically, at the first glance, he was unlike other men, though it was his habit sedulously to avoid obvious eccentricity of appearance. He was clean-shaven ; dark, silky hair ; clever, close-set eyes ; a thin mouth, drawn a trifle as if by thought at the corners ; a clean-cut, intellectual, slightly hatchet-shaped profile ; and in his bearing, the unconscious, distinguished ease of fine-breeding. The average man of his age disliked him, generally with impatience ; women, on the other hand, were interested in his air of modern picturesqueness. And some, divining beneath his boyish manner a discreet, an intuitive experience of women, and relying on his mobile, emotional nature—that had been said of him, and he knew it—were led to treat him almost as if he were of their own sex.

III

"God is good, Nellie! What a brick He's been!"

"Hush! you mustn't talk like that."

She smiled in quick response to the sudden sound of his voice, and her face flushed a little eagerly. It was a face unattractive according to cheap, conventional standards of prettiness, an unobtrusive face—simple, brown hair, insignificant eyes, and pale lips—a face wearing an unconscious girlishness, and yet a delicate suggestion of maturity. "My wife is so deliciously English," Hillier often said of her afterwards.

"Why not? Before I never thought much about Him. He was like the king of some far-off country, about whom, now and then, one mechanically reads paragraphs in the papers. But now He seems quite near, quite familiar—just like an old pal."

"Hillier, don't! It's blasphemy."

"But it's true. I understand Him quite well now. I suppose it's because I'm happy—so infinitely, splendidly, gloriously happy."

"Are you?"

"Yes; and it's you—all you. You in that adorable blue dress, with that ivory skin, that warm, sparkling hair."

"Stop! you dear——"

"And it's everything else as well. The whole world is changed. The sun is stretching out his big, warm hands to me. Look! the trees are like demure school-girls in new, green frocks, and the cool immensity of that sky. Nell, I understand what it all means."

"Tell me."

"It means that you are adorable—more adorable than any woman who has been, or is, or will be; that I am happier than any man has ever been before on this earth; that the sun knows it, the little green trees know it."

"How wonderfully you talk, Hillier!"

"Darling, come near to me. Give me your hand—a warm, pulsing morsel of your dear self."

"Some one might see. Look! there are people in the road."

"Ha! Dolts, in black coats and ugly, stiff hats."

"They're going to church."

He snorted contempt. Then, presently:

"How everything in the air says that it's Sunday—that all the world is at rest. It's sacrilege to work on such a gorgeous day."

"But lots of people have to."

"Yes, I suppose they do," he answered carelessly.

* * * * *

"Some day when I've become a great writer," and he smiled at his own affectation of conceit, "I'll write a book on the mystery of happiness; where

all shall be happiness, profound happiness, like mine, from the first page to the last. There is a man who says that any one can be happy, if he only will take enough trouble about it."

"Well?"

"That's rot!"

* * * * *

"There are only five days more, and then you will have to go back to work. You will be away all day, and I shall only have you in the evenings, when you're tired out."

"Work! Turn myself once more into a publisher's drudge! I want to live. How can a man work when he's living, when he's feeling things, as I am now? What do they all come to—success, and the petty ambitions to which one sacrifices one's life? Bah! it's a wretched, treadmill sort of existence."

"But you were quite content doing it once?"

"Only a sort of thin, relative contentedness. Because one didn't know any better. Not this sort of ultimate happiness." And he reflected on the felicity of the new-found expression.

A little later she began:

"Hillier, go on telling me what you think about the world and things. It's all so strange—the way you talk of it all, I mean—and I want to understand what is it in me that makes you so happy? Tell me, that's what I want to understand."

"It's just yourself—your hair, your eyes, your mouth, your arms, your hands, your feet. It's

your sweetness, your gentleness, your ignorance, your purity."

* * * * *

"Tell me," he said suddenly, "who made love to you before I did?"

"No one—except the little doctor, and he didn't really."

"What! that freckled little chap I saw at the school-treat? I should think not."

"But he was very nice and kind. He used to walk miles and miles to get me flowers. And, Hillier, I sometimes used to like him a great deal."

"Shut up. It's too monstrous. But you don't mean it. Why, you and I were made for each other: as you said the other day, you were just waiting for me all those years down in that quiet, old-fashioned vicarage."

"But, Hillier, why should you mind about the doctor? You've had flirtations too."

"How do you know?"

"I guessed it. How many?"

"I don't know. I've never counted."

"But how many? Three?"

"Oh! yes; more than that."

"Six?"

"Yes."

"More than six?"

"Perhaps."

"Twelve?"

"Yes; about a dozen, I suppose."

"Hillier, is that true?"

He nodded.

"And didn't you care for any of them?"

"No, not really."

"And they——"

"Well?"

"Didn't they care?"

"Yes; I suppose some did. At least, they pretended to."

"Oh! Hillier, don't talk like that. It's not you; it's like some one else. It's horrible. And did you tell them that you loved them?"

"Yes, sometimes."

A pause. There was trouble on her face: on his, nettled impatience.

"Hillier, did you only flirt with them?"

"What do you mean?"

"Was there nothing—nothing more between you?"

"Come, Ella," he answered with a forced laugh, "you're cross-examining me like a regular lawyer."

"No, I must know—I ought to know!"

"We'll talk about it some other time—not now."

"No—now!"

"Well, if you must know, there was."

"With all of them?"

"With most of them."

* * * * *

"Well, what are you thinking about?" he began again, with obvious uneasiness.

"Why didn't you tell me before?"

"How could I? Besides, what does it matter now?"

"If I had been like that, what would you have said when I told you?"

"I shouldn't have cared a jot. Do you suppose I only love you for your virtues. I love you for yourself. I want you just as you are."

"But if I'd been different?"

"But you aren't. So there's an end of it."

"But, Hillier, just now you were angry when I told you of the doctor."

"No, I wasn't. Only he's such a puny creature."

"And *they*—were they all so beautiful?"

"Yes, every one," he replied, with brutal pride.

"Much more than me? . . . I suppose you said to them all the fine phrases you have been saying to me. . . . No wonder they come so easily." But she had not the strength to sustain the hard note of sarcasm. She turned her back on him quickly and stared across the lawn. And he, impulsively reminding himself of her purity, of the fineness of his former attitude towards her, upbraided himself helplessly, and, putting his arm round her, soothed her with an outpouring of intense tenderness.

IV

She was awake. The fresh sunshine filled the room. Some birds were twittering as they sported in the creeper outside ; inside, the sound of his breathing rose and fell in heavy regularity.

. . . . Six weeks this morning ! But it was like years and years : at least the memories of the old life were faint and blurred ; far, far back in the past ; to recall them was almost an effort.

She shifted her position in the bed. The hair was dishevelled ; the long, colourless cheeks lay inert ; the mouth was half open. His handsomeness was gone ; at least so she fancied ; and the empty expression on his face coarsened it, brutalized it. He looked as she had never seen him look before. She shrank from him, she knew not why. She was his now ! How strange that was ! for all at once it seemed to her that she knew nothing of him, and the revelation of this ignorance scared her. He was twenty-eight years old. He had been a man for eight years. Eight years ! Twice four years ! She tried to realize the stretch of time that four years meant. And she knew nothing—nothing, but what he had told her yesterday. She tried to think—what did she know ? He had lived in London many years

he had been very poor once then things had changed and now he worked for a great publishing firm his name appeared sometimes in the London papers and he had numbers of friends, celebrated people.

She found herself resenting her ignorance of these eight years. Why had he married her? How came it that she, a simple clergyman's daughter, should mean to him all those wonderful things?

At the corner of High Field Lane she had seen him for the first time. He was sketching, with his back turned towards her. She stopped to look at his picture, and he turned round with a stare so rude, it had seemed, that she hurried away. How odd those beginnings appeared now!

In those days, his tall, thin figure, his clear-sounding voice, each detail of his person, dominated the rest of the world, and his words fascinated her.

Was it changed now? No, it was the same—only, there was yesterday afternoon. But she did not think of that now: she was just yearning for home. The oppressiveness of her sense of isolation increased. Even *he* was asleep, dreaming, perhaps, his thoughts away from her, in places, with people, that she did not know. For the second time since the marriage the tears welled up. She strove to convince herself that it was but childish folly, but she could not keep them back. Then she let them come. To cry was a sweet relief.

A little while and it passed, leaving her numb.

And she fell to considering drowsily the long years ahead—twenty, thirty—which must be passed by his side. She wondered how it would be when he was an old man and she an old woman. At least she would know him better then. Perhaps he would love her as he did now; perhaps they would be like old Doctor Manners and his wife, white-haired, wrinkled, yet caressing as young lovers. But she did not think it would be so—something indefinable, instinctive, told her that it would not be.

And then her thoughts went back to home. They would be less poor now, and that cheered her. Times had grown bad of late. The tenant had left the glebe farm, and no other could be found. She knew well to what straits the slender income had been put.

Often she had longed to go out as a governess, and in all probability she would have gone had she but known how to set about it. But she had no qualifications: she could not paint, or play the piano, and she knew no French. This helplessness of hers galled her; there were times when she had grudged the very food she ate. So, when he had appeared, to single her out, to tell her that he loved her, to ask her to be his wife, she had not hesitated. To consult her own feelings, searchingly, never occurred to her. Afterwards she had given herself no sort of merit for this: for when he was with her she was quite happy; and when he was not there too. Only there had been

moments when she dreaded the step—when she shrank from the irrevocable, the unknown.

One day he went to London and brought back with him three black leather cases full of jewels. A ring, a brooch, and a bracelet. And, somehow, these jewels made her even less at her ease with him than ever. She couldn't help wondering what they must have cost, and it seemed to her wrong to spend so much on things about which she did not care. She felt, too, with a sort of shame, that she could not help showing him that she did not thank him for them genuinely. But, she noticed, he did not care; he was so pleased with them himself.

When the wedding-day had come, she had not realized it at all; it had all been queer and unreal, like a dream. The service so solemn and beautiful she had thought it, when she read it over to herself; but, in the church, she never listened. Her eyes were fixed on the sapphires in the bracelet he had given her; she was wondering how much they had cost.

This house, too, to which he had brought her, the unfamiliar furniture, and the strange faces of the servants, had only added to her sense of isolation. Yet, after all, it was better now.

* * * * *

He had slipped his arms round her. He had seen that her cheeks were wet with tears.

"Nell!"

At the sound of his voice, clear and strong, she impulsively nestled her head on his shoulder.

"Come, little one, what is it? Out with the secret grief."

"I was thinking of home. You are so good to me, Hillier. You won't mind, will you?" And the yearning to pour out what was in her heart gave her courage. "I've never been away from them before—and—and it seems so strange."

She paused: he was stroking her wrist; the soothing was delicious.

"They are so poor. Father hasn't had any rent from the glebe farm for two years And you've made me so rich It doesn't seem fair."

"Darling one, what isn't fair is that I haven't a thousand times more to give you."

"But what have I done that I should have so much?"

"Nothing, of course, except existed."

She smiled absently.

"Hillier, I do wish I could do something to help them."

"Send them a hundred pounds," he answered.

"A hundred pounds! You will give me a hundred pounds to send to them?"

She covered his face with kisses; his eyes, his cheeks, his mouth.

He submitted with an affectation of resistance.

"I wonder if there is another man on earth like you, Hillier," she murmured.

V

The hundred pounds were duly dispatched—ten clean, crackling bank-notes in a registered envelope. And, when it was all finished, they went out into the garden, hand in hand.

He could ill afford the money; but that fact spurred him the more to send it; and in an hour or two his interest in the matter had faded: he referred to it but once with a carelessness that was not assumed. But on her, the incident made an impression of no slight depth: late at night, and early in the morning, the remembrance of it was with her: such generosity seemed wonderful. Traces of its influence were discernible in each small phase of her attitude towards him: she reproached herself for not having done justice in her own mind to his generosity before: yet she set to work eagerly to discover ways of pleasing him: she reproduced a little of his extravagance of language, and stimulated with rare tact his exuberant expression of opinion, even when the topic was unfamiliar and uncongenial to her.

From her up-bringing—from the methodical monotony of her home life—she had learned the habit of mental precision. She had begun, by a sort of classification of his sayings, to endeavour to

arrive at the nature of his thoughts, to discover what was his faith in religion, in Christ, and she waited always for the day when he should talk to her on these matters.

The passionateness of his love communicated itself irresistibly to her. This had troubled her, she did not know whether it was right or wrong. She had sought vainly, in the teaching of her life, for guidance. But such was the ignorance in which her girlhood had been spent that she found nothing.

Now, however, all these misgivings were merged in her aspiration to be worthy of him, to please him absolutely.

And thus his satisfaction in her, and in himself for having found her, grew in completeness, as the days of the honeymoon drew to their close.

VI

She sat in the garden alone. The hum of insects, and a faint scent of sweet hay was in the air; the trees, robed in the sombre green of midsummer, stood solid and still; masses of cloud, ponderous and white, crowded the sky.

She saw all these things, and yet she was unconscious of them. Her eyes were restless with excitement.

Yes, she was beginning to see clearer now, or rather to realize her immediate surroundings.

London!—the broad, white streets, the never-ceasing flow of cabs and carriages, the shining shop-windows, and the black crowd on the pavement—to-morrow she would be there; she was impatient for it to come.

She would become a Londoner; soon she would be quite at home in the great city. Hillier would take her to the theatre; to the opera; she would be mistress of his house, and sit at the bottom of the table when they had dinner-parties: and when she had grown quite familiar with it all, father and mother should come; she saw herself walking through the streets with them, naming to them all the famous people as they rolled by in their carriages. And she felt very, very happy.

VII

They were quite strange, these first impressions of London: at least, so they seemed, when she recalled them afterwards; as if, in those days, the forms of the buildings had been altogether altered.

Disappointment—disappointment which, for a while, she had refused to recognize—disappointment which, later, she had struggled to suppress—that was what she had first felt.

The hansom, which brought them from the station, rattled past the long line of porticoes, stretching away and away, in spacious monotony, down the Cromwell Road: then halted. And the house—which was to be theirs—looked lonely, cheerless, dreary, with its expanse of grey-black wall. The sense of separation from every surrounding of her country home, each hallowed by its particular associations—the green garden-seats under the trees, the shrubbery-walks, the flowers, the bright colours—came back to her.

Radiant and eager, he led her through all the house, from the basement to the servants' bedrooms under the roof. At the beginning, she made some effort to echo his laughter, to emulate his buoyancy; but, before they had come to the end, she was following him wearily, sick at heart,

longing for it to be over, that she might be alone with her own thoughts.

It was only when they were having tea, by themselves in the drawing-room, that he perceived her dejection. And he questioned her so gently, that, in one generous impulse, she gave him all that was in her heart, pouring out her disappointment and her distress, reproaching herself the while for her weakness and for her ingratitude. He seated himself by her side on the sofa, and soothed her, till he had changed her sadness to hesitating happiness, and from hesitating happiness to the rest of pure delight.

In a corner of the bare, half-furnished drawing-room, while, outside, the rattle of wheels rose, shook the windows, and died away in the distance, he talked, narrating his love for her, till all the vista of the future became tinged with gold.

After dinner, while he smoked, she sat on a cushion at his feet, resting her head between his knees.

And when at last they went up-stairs, she remembered nothing but his goodness, and the abandonment to the intoxication of his love.

VIII

There were three days before he must go back to his work—three days more to be passed together; and then, morning after morning, he would have to set off to his work; and all day, till the late afternoon, she would be alone.

They had talked together of this daily separation, many times—he resenting it unreasonably, she bravely concealing her dread—a double dread of solitude, and of those friends of his with whom she must become acquainted. For she divined that there would be no affinity between them and her.

But they were busy days; for the furniture that the house possessed was quite scanty, and they had but a single, temporary servant.

So full of their joy as to be oblivious of all that was not directly concerned in it, they wandered through many spacious shops, hesitating at the entrance to consult a voluminous list which she had conscientiously compiled; then, after starting in the wake of some stately shopman, halting continually, calling the one to the other, purchasing capriciously. Just at first his joyous recklessness roused her scruples: soon, she became entirely infected with his exuberance.

In the evenings, they were eager to have done with their dinner, that they might the sooner attack the pile of packages encumbering the hall, and spread their contents on the dining-room table, critically, as if for exhibition.

And, besides, there were servants to be engaged. Hillier was charmed by her timid avowal of inexperience, and good-humouredly took the matter into his own hands, inserting advertisements in the newspapers. So on the morning of their last day they breakfasted earlier than usual: then, as soon as the cloth was cleared, seated themselves, in judgment as it were, at one end of the long table.

And the invasion began. In rapid succession they appeared; portly women in smart bonnets; chubby country-girls; maids with prim, genteel voices; bouncing, garrulous creatures of all shapes and sizes.

Hillier attacked each one with the same determination, questioning and cross-questioning with a confident fluency that filled her with amusement and admiration. So, by luncheon-time, their household was completed.

And all the while, to know that the separation was at hand, lent to the close companionship of these first days in London—the last of the honeymoon, she named them to herself—a subtle excitement and a precious charm.

IX

"How far is it?"

"About three miles. You'd only better come as far as the Circus."

"Oh! let me come all the way, please."

"There, poor little girl, of course you shall, if you want to."

The morning sunlight was gladdening the city, gilding the roof-tops, driving the dirt from the houses, lending to the pavement a dazzling whiteness, paving the roadway with burnished nuggets, glinting on the panels of carriages, and on the flanks of horses.

"Look, Hillier! what a beautiful morning!"

Something of the glad spirit entered into her, as, by his side, she walked past the great yellow museum, all agleam in the insolence of its ugliness. To glance down at her bright-blue dress, which she was wearing for the first time, gave her a sense of elation, of kinship with the day's mood.

Hillier was jubilant; talking, jesting, laughing loudly; so that, as they passed, people turned to look at them. And when he noticed this, he jested the louder.

They turned into the Park, and away across the green towards Rotten Row.

In the distance the trees, all veiled in blue haze, were merging themselves, indistinct and indefinite, in the glowing sky. Hillier exclaimed how that exquisite atmospheric effect was to be seen but there, and in Corot's best work. She wondered who Corot was; she fancied his name must be spelt Coreau.

There they sauntered a little, watching the riders as they cantered past. Once an acquaintance of Hillier's raised his hat. She divined, quickly, that the obvious curiosity with which the man eyed her was distasteful to him; for he started to narrate, in a forced, jocular manner, his peculiarities. She felt that the edge of her happiness was dulling; as if something, coming between them, had alienated his sympathy from her.

When they reached Piccadilly, she was thinking of the return home; the way seemed long, and she would be alone: she was recapitulating all the occupations with which she had told herself last night she would fill the day till his return.

Moreover, she was acutely conscious that, for the moment, she had no place in his thoughts. She heard him explaining a quarrel between a famous author and the firm of publishers who employed him as reader, and she knew that he had never noticed that she was not listening. Then he spoke of the future, of the people who would call on her, who would ask them to dinner, and whom they would have to entertain in return.

To hear all these names, with which she was quite unfamiliar, made her heart sink lower and lower.

At the crossing they paused, for several omnibuses blocked the road: from behind, from each side, the people crowded to the pavement-edge, waiting to cross.

And still he went on talking.

The soreness of her wounded pride grew intolerable.

"I shall go back now," she said: but she was keenly hoping that he would ask her to come on.

"Poor little Nell! you're tired. I'll put you into a hansom."

"I'd rather walk," she answered curtly.

He looked at her doubtfully, then—

"No, you can't," he remonstrated.

"I'd rather—at least the bit across the Park."

"Good-bye," he said. Next, with a glimmer of how things were, he added, "The little wife must take great care of herself. I shall dash home in the swiftest hansom in the Strand."

The omnibuses had moved on: the roadway was clear: the people, pressing forward, swallowed him up.

She noticed that he had not touched her hand, or raised his hat to her. Back, against the tide of men and women flowing towards the City, she turned; dreary-hearted, isolated, in the midst of this crowd that pushed past her, in whose life she had no part. Every one seemed to be watching her, staring at her, hardly, hostilely. She felt more and more awkward, and different from the rest.

X

During the late afternoon he returned, bringing her some bunches of violets. She found herself almost shy of him: she told him so, and they laughed together.

In the evening a band struck up near the house, so they carried chairs and rugs on to the balcony and sat there, talking a little, while the music played. He was pleased that she was thus tender, subdued in manner towards him. Her companionship cost him no effort, and he reminded himself how, in marrying her, he had done well.

Later, in the silence of the night, she listened to the passionate expression of his love, and the memory of the walk, of the parting, of the dreary loneliness in which the day had been spent, faded till it had grown vague and insignificant. Only the next morning she did not offer to accompany him: he did not suggest it: he just kissed her in the hall, his hat on his head, his stick in his hand, and went.

She was not sorry that it was thus.

XI

So the days went by.

She set to work seriously, methodically, to accustom herself to the new routine, resolute to learn, to make herself at ease in her new life. She was uneasy on account of her ignorance of the ways of people in London; yet she shrank from communicating her uneasiness to him—partly from a desire to conceal her short-comings, and partly, perhaps, because she feared lest, in betraying them, she would be risking something—of the precise nature of which she had no idea.

And she was busy making progress. From conversations listened to in the drawing-rooms she visited, she acquired a glib familiarity with the jargon of her new surroundings; she learnt to manipulate easily, without effort, just those turns of phrase calculated to sustain amiable conversation.

Besides, from books, from review articles, from his talk, she was getting a queer, jumbled knowledge of modern thought—of Ibsen, of the labour question, of impressionism, of the works of George Meredith, of the emancipation of women. It was the pressure of a constant consciousness of her husband's superiority that impelled her to struggle

with all these things. " Hillier wants me to be clever," she had said to herself. But, as yet, her labour bore no fruit ; only the sense of her own ignorance and of her own stupidity came of it. Now and then, with a glimmering perception of the wickedness of the world, she revolted against what she read : but she was generally too preoccupied with the thoughts that were at work in the background of her own mind to grasp intelligently the author's meaning.

XII

The innumerable small signs of her love for him, of her submission to him in all things, afforded his vanity a continual regalement such as it had never known before: beside no other woman had he experienced that sense of complete mastery. He attributed his contentment to the depth of his love. At the same time, the period of dissatisfaction with the various sentimental experiences, which other women had bequeathed to him, closed. He had already almost persuaded himself that they were a not inappropriate prelude to the adoration which his wife laid at his feet.

Thus, the best that was in him was brought to the surface.

He had visioned himself as treating her with forbearance, indulgence, sweetness, after having displayed an intelligent unworldliness in marrying her. During the honeymoon, and the first days in London, he had achieved this attitude quite satisfactorily, and since he had found that achievement easy, he glided into a complacent security with regard to the future.

After the strangeness of the first days had worn off, he had been busy with dreams of his own possibilities as her husband. Her entire lack of

all that small knowledge, of which, in London, she would stand in such need, did not daunt him ; it excited him, while her responsiveness, her eagerness to accept him as a teacher, swelled his self-confidence.

And her continual recognition of his kindness towards her, and her avowals of her faith in him, led him insensibly to shirk the knowledge that, after all, he was not what she believed him to be.

XIII

A sullen buzz of voices, a dazzle of light, a crowded confusion of men and women, huddled together.

They passed the doorway, but they could get no further : the room was quite full.

The faces she saw were quite strange : a grey-haired woman in a low-cut dress lifted some glasses with a long handle to her eyes and stared. Some man nodded to Hillier : the rest did not move.

So they stood there, hemmed in on all sides, looking round them. She wanted to ask Hillier who the people were. But she dared not, they were all so near.

Disjointed words, fragments of phrases reached her ears. After a while, quite close, a woman's voice was saying—

“A simple, country girl. Before she met him her mind must have been a blank. I guess it's pretty well scored with his scribblings though by this time. She takes him, I hear, with prodigious solemnity—and herself too, for that matter.”

“Yes, it's a great pity. Somebody should have done something. But no one knew of it till it was done. He's made a huge fool of himself.” The voice was a man's.

The woman's voice answered something which she could not hear.

She looked, and saw them standing quite close, with their backs turned towards her.

"He's very devoted to her?" the woman's voice began again.

The man said something in a lower tone and the woman laughed.

"What girl wouldn't under the circumstances?" he added.

"She's sweetly pretty, people say."

"Bah! the world's stuffed full of pretty women."

Hillier's hand gripped her arm.

"Come, let's get on," she heard him saying.

The roughness of his tone startled her. She saw the tight look on his face. What was the matter?

He pressed forward, and, as there was not space for her to follow, he dragged at her arm. But there were no gaps in the human wall in front. The floor was blocked.

Next, a young man shook hands with Hillier, who introduced him to her. He made some remark about the great crowd.

The voices began again; the woman was speaking.

"If it's as you say, she'll be a great drag on him."

"He's not the sort of man to enjoy recognizing his own mistakes—especially one of that kind."

"Perhaps he will never recognize it."

"Life is long," answered the man's voice.

She noticed that the young man who had been introduced to her was talking to some one else. The voices were indistinct now. Next she caught the words :—

“And, you know, he might have married Mrs. Hendrick.”

Mrs. Hendrick ! Mrs. Hendrick was a friend of Hillier's. In a flash it came to her that it was of her—and of Hillier—that they were talking. For a moment the meaning of their words vanished, while resentment, hot and reckless, rose. She wanted to walk straight up to them—there before everybody—to tell them that they were mean, cowardly, hateful. Then the words returned, bringing dull pain. She longed to be alone with him, she was hungering for his comfort.

“Let's get out of this,” he blurted.

He had heard it all, too.

He pushed his way towards the door ; she following, dazed. She seemed to hear the voices still talking, indistinctly, behind her.

When they reached the landing, and were free of the crowd, her dress caught behind her. But he strode on, holding her arm so tightly that she could not stop, and the stuff tore loudly.

* * * * *

He had not spoken since they left the house. In the obscurity of the cab she could not see his face, and, till she had read its expression, she shrank from speaking. Several times, as they shot past a lamp-post, she threw a furtive glance at

him. But his hat was tilted over his eyes, and the light was gone, before she could distinguish anything. She rubbed the moisture from off a corner of the window-pane, and peered out. Everything was dark and deserted ; only the gas-lamps seemed awake. And the cab shot by them—one after another—rapidly.

* * * *

He half wanted to speak to her, for he was aware that his silence was cruel ; that he was playing an entirely ugly part. And the consciousness of how much a word of comfort would mean to her, of his own impotence to speak it, and the suspicion that she was crying, increased his exasperation considerably, tempting him to address her brutally.

He blamed her ; yet he knew he had no right to do so : he disliked her ; yet he knew that he was causing her to suffer.

They reached home in silence.

In the hall, a small impulse of remorse prompted him to lift off her cloak for her ; but, as he came forward, she stepped past him with an assumption of haughtiness, so that he could not touch her. Immediately the full flame of his anger flared forth : he tasted an exasperated joy in that she had at last afforded him a pretext for losing his self-control.

He stepped into the study, and slammed the door behind him with all his force.

* * * *

In her room, she sat down mechanically, without taking off her cloak. Her expression was blank : she could not cry.

Then she struggled to comfort herself. After all, perhaps it didn't matter what people said of her. It would be just the same to-morrow.

She whispered to herself some old words of his : —“You are the whole world to me : I cannot live without you. I love you, I love you, I love you.” Three times he had said it : she shivered : for, somehow, they brought her no warmth.

How long would he be down there ?

* * * * *

Oh ! why had it ever been ?

* * * * *

And, all at once, her whole being rose in fierce rebellion against her married life ; she recalled, with added bitterness, her first revolt against the revelation which marriage had brought.

She felt that she hated the whole world, that there was no sweet savour left in life. Human nature, men and women, seemed hideous, degraded. And she hated herself because she had become like the rest.

She recalled the calm days of her girlhood with exceeding bitterness. She could never be like that again.

Then she felt that she could not bear to speak to him again to-night. When he came up she pretended to be asleep. He made no attempt to wake her ; and, before long, he was heavily sleeping by her side.

XIV

The next morning, as they were preparing to get up :—

"I wish you'd put on that blue dress you used to wear when we were engaged," he said.

She had already learned the intonations of his voice, and, as he spoke, she recoiled a little.

"That old thing. I couldn't."

"I don't see why not. You used to look fifty times better in that than in all these new gaudy arrangements."

The harshness of his tone hurt her the more because it had come suddenly, at the very beginning of the day.

"Oh, Hillier! you never said you didn't like my new dresses," she faltered.

"I only say the other one suits you, and they don't."

She remembered the money they had cost, and how she had resolved to make each last as long as possible to compensate for the extravagance of buying them.

"What's wrong with them?"

"I don't know," he answered pettishly.

"But tell me what you don't like about them, and I will try to get them altered."

"That's no good ; get a fresh lot. A different shape, more flowing lines, not tight and stiff." He did not look up : he was rummaging among some proofs on the bed.

"But it's so expensive," she pleaded.

"I tell you they don't suit you. How can you wear things that don't suit you ? "

"I think you're horrid," she broke out, as he went into his dressing-room.

When she came down-stairs, he was sitting reading the proofs which were littered on the floor around his chair. He took no notice of her as she entered.

"I believe it's all because of what those people said last night." Before the words were all uttered she was vaguely astonished at herself, and afraid of him.

"Don't go on nagging like that, you little fool ! Do you hear ? " he retorted loudly.

She turned to the breakfast-table. She glanced back at him ; he did not look as if he were sorry that he had so spoken. Her resentment swelled tumultuously : she was shaking all over. If she had been a dog he could not have spoken more brutally ; and he had said it just as if he were accustomed to speak to her so. Then the scene, that Sunday morning, in the garden, during the honeymoon, came back to her. Those words, that tone, he had thrown them at some one of the other women, and they had returned for her to hear, like an echo from the past. All through breakfast she

continued to nurse this idea till she could not trust herself to speak to him, so bitterly did she feel.

He went on reading his proofs while he ate, and when he had done, gathered them together ostentatiously, saying that he was pressed for time.

A few minutes later the hall-door slammed.

A wild impulse prompted her to write to her mother ; to tell her about last night and about this morning, that he no longer cared for her, that she wanted to come home, back to the old life, never to leave them again.

But as she dipped the pen in the ink the reaction came. Such a letter would seem silly, excited, absurd. She left the writing-table and started to busy herself with other things.

XV

Meanwhile he was walking towards Hyde Park Corner, irritated against the people who obstructed his path.

An obstreperous November wind, gusty and biting, was rushing about the streets: several ragged, dark clouds were careering across a leaden slab of sky. It was the beginning of winter, and he cursed the vile climate of London as only fit for cattle and dogs.

A press of work owing to the approach of Christmas had obliged him to cut short his morning's walk: and this, for want of a better pretext, increased his annoyance.

As he passed the French Embassy, a hansom drove by, carrying a woman wearing a white veil, who stared round at him through the side glass. Before he could raise his hat in recognition she was gone. It was Mrs. Hendrick.

The words "and he might have married Mrs. Hendrick" threw a whole new light upon her, revealing of a sudden the reason of many things in the past. How blind he must have been never to have perceived it before! Of course it was him that she wanted. How she had done her best to tell him this, and how obstinately he had shut his

eyes! If he had only known, all sorts of curious things might have happened.

Probably she was quite forty; for she had wrinkles under her eyes and round her mouth, and her skin, white as it was, was altogether opaque. Yes, certainly she looked best in evening dress; or, at twilight, in a pallid-gold tea-gown which matched her hair. And she had seven thousand a year.

He recalled his meeting with that ruffian Hendrick, her husband, a fortnight after she had divorced him—jovial and superb in spite of his grey hairs—banking in the baccarat-rooms at Aix-les-Bains. He had chatted with the fellow afterwards on the balcony of the *Cercle*. Hendrick had talked the case over shamelessly.

He remembered certain things which the man had hinted to him concerning her—things which no one but Hendrick could have known; and he wondered more than ever at himself how it was he had never noticed.

Mrs. Hendrick had never been to see Ella. The juxtaposition of the two women in his mind produced an only half-stifled movement of repentance, and of shame at his own behaviour this morning. Yet, he argued, there was nothing against Mrs. Hendrick; few women could have gone through such a case so satisfactorily.

* * * * *

By-and-bye, in the afternoon, he received a com-

mission to write for an important review, a survey of the year's literature.

This unexpected stroke of good fortune, and the thought that he might have married Mrs. Hendrick, lent an elasticity to his gait as he walked home.

XVI

"Oh! I'm so glad!" she exclaimed, when he had finished telling her of his success. "And, Hillier, Mrs. Hendrick has been here."

"She ought to have come before." There was an insincere note of grievance in his tone. "Well, how did she seem?"

"I don't know she was very nice, and stayed a long time. She said she had seen you from a hansom this morning, and that reminded her of her negligence. She asked me to go to see her on Tuesday It's so difficult, Hillier. . . . She's much older than I expected. I thought she must be quite a young woman."

"Why?"

"Because I heard that man say the other evening that—that you might have married her And it seemed so—absurd." She brought out the words bravely, though a little tremulously.

He said nothing; so she went on more hurriedly:

"It isn't true, Hillier, is it?—tell me—that she was one of those you know, that afternoon in the garden"

"No, of course not."

"Will you promise me, Hillier?"

"You don't believe me, then?" he exclaimed, almost angrily.

"Yes, dear—only I wanted to be sure."

"Well, then, I swear it. Now are you satisfied?"

"But she was a great friend of yours."

"I knew her a good deal. She was married to a brute of a man who used to treat her like a dog."

And he told her something of the rest.

"But her husband—where's her husband now?"

"I don't know; in Paris, probably."

"Didn't he care, then?"

"Not a rap."

"How horrible! How long had they been married?"

"Fifteen years. Why on earth she put up with him so long, I can't imagine. It was only when he took to bringing his—mistresses—to the house that she divorced him."

"Poor woman! How she must have suffered!"

There was a pause. Then she added—

"Hillier, I'm so glad she came. I want her to like me—to be friends with me—because I think she likes you very much."

"What makes you think that?"

"I don't know—but I'm sure she does."

And he did not mention the article to her.

XVII

There lurked, beneath the sweetness of Mrs. Hendrick's smile, and the gentleness of her voice, and the fragility of her whole appearance, an air of bitterness, restrained and refined. After the exposure of her husband's cruelty, a section of Society had considered itself justified in proclaiming an emphatic sympathy with her wrongs; women discussed her with long-drawn exclamations; men lowered their voices when they spoke to her; people, whose faces were unfamiliar, gushed with affectionate sympathy; some boldly indiscreet; others affecting tact; and those who had known her longer vindicated effusively their right to correct the general curiosity concerning her. Her worn beauty was in harmony with her new position; and those who were busy with her, hailed this harmony with satisfaction, affording, as it did, a fresh subject for comment. And lastly, the large fortune which she inherited just five weeks after she had regained her freedom, made her acquaintances more anxious than ever to assist her in the arrangement of her existence.

But by none of these things was she deceived, for just then she was disinterested enough in the course of her own existence to perceive that it all

was entirely natural. And so, her attitude towards the world remained inert, apathetic, full of tired reserve. She repulsed people wearily, though politely ; she was aware that she had no appetite for the cheap consolations they had to offer her. To abandon herself to her lassitude, to rest, to sleep, to forget, to put time between the present and the past—these were her longings.

By-and-bye there came with her wealth a clearer realization of her freedom, which made her wearily wonder why she had submitted so long, why she had thus wasted the best years of her life.

At these moments she marvelled bitterly at him who had been her husband : at his jovial insensibility, at the satisfaction, facile and complete, which his simple sensuality afforded him. She hated him ; for she knew that he did not care. Thus, indifferent to the present, hopeless with regard to the future, she saw everything as dreary, colourless. It was as if the corner she had just turned had brought her face to face with a dead wall.

Occasionally some sharp phrase of the simple-minded old relative, who had come to live with her, made her conscious of her listlessness ; and then, she rated herself morbid, or hard, selfish, incapable of emotion, and mused how it would have been if she had had a child.

Yet she continued to fulfil the engagements which Society made for her, because the effort of escaping from them seemed beyond her strength.

And all this was two years ago.

It was down in Norfolk, at a country-house, where they were fellow-guests, that her acquaintanceship with Hillier Haselton had developed into intimacy.

He, the morning of his arrival, had related to her—with a careless audacity that she set down as rare tact—how he had met Henry Hendrick on the Continent, a fortnight before. This placed him, in her eyes, in a slightly privileged position, which he was not slow to assume. So, somehow she drifted into talking to him about herself; on the terrace after breakfast, smoking a cigarette, he would saunter with her, up and down; he would fetch a basket-chair, and sit by her on the lawn, while the rest played tennis; he would row her on the lake in the late afternoon.

It only lasted a week, but they were much alone together, and their conversation glided insensibly into a tone of intimate seriousness. She hinted to him, at certain moments of eager expansion, of things concerning herself which, when she recalled them afterwards, scared her; yet the next day she would begin again to tell him more. She could not help herself.

Before he left, she had told him of her gratitude; though, indeed, she could not say what it was that he had done for her; only that she understood how un-glad her heart had been before, and that the common things of life looked less cheerless. Perhaps it was a little the consciousness of her wealth, and the new power it brought to her; for she had confided to him, timidly, her secret wish to

employ a large—a very large—portion of it towards helping the outcast children of the great cities, and he had taken up this desire of hers, encouraged it, expanded it, given it, as it seemed to her, practical shape. And on this section of human suffering he spoke simply, with no affectation of false sentiment ; so that to discuss it with him was in no wise difficult, as was the case with other people.

He seemed to her strong, fearless, a man of fine fibre.

* * * * *

A month passed, and then they were both back in London. He came one afternoon when she had other visitors : he only stayed a short while, but she learned that he had not forgotten the “scheme,” as he called it, that he had been busying himself with its realization. And that, amid the stress of his own work, he should have found time to help her, touched her exceedingly, and intensified her admiration.

She saw him again, not unfrequently, for they had many friends in common ; yet they never again got beyond the superficial small-talk of mere acquaintances. She shrank, somehow, from any attempt to renew their intimacy.

Once more he inquired concerning the “scheme” ; but on learning that it was proceeding satisfactorily, he passed to another topic. He seemed unwilling that they should talk again as they had talked, in the summer, down in Norfolk.

So they drifted apart: she attributed it to his

busy life which left him so little leisure ; and she retained in her mind a clear image of him, as he had first appeared to her—strong, fearless, a man of fine fibre.

* * * * *

And now, he was married—a penniless clergyman's daughter—a love-marriage, accomplished quietly, secretly almost, in defiance of every worldly interest.

She thought it very characteristic of him.

All her interest in him revived. Yes, she might make friends with his wife, help her in little ways ; and thus, indirectly, she would be of use to him. This idea grew rapidly in her mind : she was very eager to be friends with his wife.

XVIII

Ella by this time possessed a large number of acquaintances, but she sought out the society of no one of them, content that they should remain on the fringe, as it were, of her life. Her natural reserve exempted her from the temptation to entrust to others a selection of her inmost feelings; and she had no skill in superficial companionship. Thus she made no friends.

It was commonly reported that she "had not much in her"; or by others more shallow in thought and acrid of speech, that she was "quite stupid." Many tongues were busy with explanations of Hillier Haselton's marriage with the commonplace daughter of a country parson, remarking how frequently brilliant men tied themselves to dull women.

And, since the other evening, she had been growing more and more acutely sensible to all this; the smart that had been inflicted had endowed her, for the moment, with bitter perspicacity; she was convincing herself that every one whom she met regarded her in the same light.

More than ever she sent her heart out towards her husband; starting afresh to urge herself to admire him extravagantly, stifling her sense of

feverish insecurity, or attributing it to physical causes.

She was disturbed, puzzled too, by Mrs. Hendrick. She was not jealous ; that would have been ridiculous ; she did not dislike her, that would have been treacherous. Hillier liked talking to Mrs. Hendrick ; when she came to dinner, and when they went to the big house in Grosvenor Place, he was in high spirits, always. And, of late, except on these occasions, he had been moody, dispirited ; the edge of his buoyancy was blunted ; he was overworking himself.

No, she was not jealous ; for Mrs. Hendrick liked talking to her, too, and was constantly proposing that they should drive together in the afternoon—to a private view, or to an afternoon party. No, she did not dislike Mrs. Hendrick ; for Mrs. Hendrick was kind, gentle, sweet.

XIX

The greater part of the afternoon he had been in his office, glancing through a manuscript.

Suddenly, while he was crossing the room to consult a volume on the shelves, the impulse to go and see Mrs. Hendrick laid hold upon him. It brought at once a feeling of excited unrest. He felt sick of work and cooped up in the room, which seemed dingy and full of dust. The desire to get out, to some immediate change, some outside excitement, became imperious.

What a long while it was since he had seen her alone! Not since that time two years ago. Certain incidents came back to him again. How was it he had been so indifferent then? He tried to flatter himself by the recollection of this indifference of his; but the effort was unsuccessful.

At that moment he entirely accepted the fact that he was tired of his wife. And, since he attributed this to some vague superiority in himself, it was without a pang that he shattered the whole accumulated fabric of his former conceptions of the possibilities of his marriage. Not that it once seemed that he had committed a piece of folly; for he was ready to blame her that she did not satisfy him. Yes, she did not satisfy him;

and he clutched at this explanation as a justification for his recent vague dreamings concerning other women. It was no particular woman that he was picturing to himself, but certain types of women which were wholly different from Ella. The actual possibility of unfaithfulness to her he had never faced; though, perhaps, he had been very near indeed to doing so—certainly much nearer than he himself imagined. But then he had always taken for granted that he was not a brute. He had only been married a few months, and he knew of no one—except notorious scoundrels—who had done that thing after a few months.

So he went out, and drove to Grosvenor Place.

XX

She was at home. The servant showed him into the drawing-room—a charming room arranged in sound taste, he had always thought it. To-day the furniture was all clothed in shiny, stiff chintzes, which lent a cold, uncomfortable look. He paced up and down restlessly, anxiously curious concerning what was about to happen. In half-an-hour it would be over, he told himself. What would be his position then? Yet he had no fixed idea as to what he was going to do. He lifted a red book from off the writing-table, opened it, and began to read the names absently—Williamson, Williamson, Williamson, Willie, Willington, Wilkie. He shut the book and replaced it. What was he going to do?

On the mantelpiece he caught sight of Ella's photograph—an old likeness taken before their marriage. The lips were parted in a faint smile, and the rose-tinted background lent delicacy and sweetness to the face. It was very like her. He realized rapidly that his passion had certainly dwindled ; that the sight of the photograph caused him no vibration of emotion.

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The door opened, Mrs. Hendrick came forward, her hand outstretched frankly, cordially.

He met her, still holding the photograph in his left hand.

She noticed it, and smiled, then began—

"I'm so glad we've made such friends, Mr. Haselton. I can't tell you how much I like her. You must be very, very happy."

"Yes," he answered instantly. "I am completely happy."

"That's right, for you deserve it."

"Why?" he asked, assuming a blank expression.

"Because—well, you know, I've always thought of you as one of those people who have a right to the best things of life. When I first heard that you were married, before I knew your wife, I was sure you had done the best thing."

"But why?" he repeated mechanically.

"Oh, because I was sure you *would* do the right thing."

He perceived that she was quite genuine in speaking to him thus, and he was not a little disappointed; her seriousness exasperated him; she suddenly became to him wholly uninteresting; he wanted her no longer.

They talked on about his wife; by-and-bye, to change the topic, and to cover his indifference to her, he asked concerning her Home, and she recounted at considerable length how it was thriving, and of the peace of mind that the work had brought her.

When she seemed to have finished he rose, saying that he must be getting home. Laughingly she begged him to replace the photograph, which, unconsciously, he had been holding in his left hand all the while. He did so with a well-simulated smile, and offered her a cheque in aid of the Home ; but she shook her head, still laughing, telling him to buy his wife a present with it instead.

And she bid him good-bye just as she had met him, frankly, cordially.

In Bond Street he stopped to look at some diamonds flashing in a jeweller's window ; two pretty women were giggling together by his side, and he wondered vaguely what he would do if anything were to happen to his wife.

A COMMONPLACE CHAPTER.—II

I

THIS was four years later.

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She sat in a corner of a large London drawing-room, and the two men stood before her—Hillier Haselton, her husband, and George Swann, her husband's cousin; and, beyond them, the mellow light of shaded candles, vague groupings of black coats, white shirt-fronts, and gay-tinted dresses; and the noisy hum of conversation.

The subject that the two men were discussing—and more especially Swann's blunt earnestness—stirred her, though throughout it she had been unpleasantly conscious of a smallness, almost a pettiness, in Hillier's aspect.

"Well, but why not, my dear Swann? Why not be unjust? man's been unjust to woman for so many years."

Hillier let his voice fall listlessly, as if to rebuke the other's vehemence; and, to hint that he was tired of the topic, looked round at his wife, noting

at the same time that Swann was observing how he held her gaze in his meaningly. And the unexpectedness of his own attitude charmed him—his hot defence of an absurd theory, obviously evoked by a lover-like desire to please her. Others, whose admiration he could trust, would, he surmised, have reckoned it a pretty pose. And she, perceiving that Swann seemed to take her husband's sincerity for granted, felt a sting of quick regret that she had ever come to understand him, and that she could not still view him as they all viewed him.

Hillier moved away across the room, and Swann drew a stool beside her chair, and asking her for news of Claude, her little boy, talked to her of other things—quite simply, for they were grown like old friends. He looked at her steadily, stroking his rough, fair beard, as if he were anxious to convey to her something which he could not put into words. She divined: and, a little startled, tried to thank him with her eyes; but, embarrassed by the clumsiness of his own attempt at sympathetic perception, he evidently noticed nothing. And this obtuseness of his disappointed her, since it somehow seemed to confirm her isolation.

She glanced round the room. Hillier stood on the hearth-rug, his elbow on the mantelpiece, busily talking, with slight, deferential gestures to the great English actress in whose honour the dinner had been given. The light fell on his smooth, glistening hair, on his quick, sensitive face; for the

moment, forcing herself to realize him as he appeared to the rest, she felt a thrill of jaded pride in him, in his cleverness, in his reputation, in his social success.

Swann, observing the direction of her gaze, said almost apologetically—

“You must be very proud of him.”

She nodded, smiling a faint, assumed smile ; then added, adopting his tone—

“His success has made him so happy.”

“And you too ?” he queried.

“Of course,” she answered quickly.

He stayed silent, while she continued to watch her husband absently.

II

Success, an atmosphere of flattery, suited Hillier Haselton, and stimulating his weaknesses, continually encouraged him to display the handsomer portion of his nature. For though he was yet young—and looked still younger—there was always apparent, beneath his frank, boyish relish of praise, a semblance of serious modesty, a strain of genuine reserve. And society—the smart, literary society that had taken him up—found this combination charming. So success had made life pleasant for him in many ways, and he rated its value accordingly; he was too able a man to find pleasure in the facile forms of conceit, or to accept, with more than a certain cynical complacency, the world's generous judgment on his work. Indeed, the whole chorus of admiration did but strengthen his contempt for contemporary literary judgments—a contempt which, lending the dignity of deliberate purpose to his indulgence of his own weakness for adulation—procured him a refined, a private, and an altogether agreeable self-satisfaction. When people set him down as vastly clever, he was pleased; he was unreasonably annoyed when they spoke of him as a great genius.

Life, he would repeat, was of larger moment

than literature ; and, despite all the freshness of his success, his interest in himself, in the play of his own personality, remained keener, and, in its essence, of more lasting a nature than his ambition for genuine achievement. The world—people with whom he was brought into relation—stimulated him so far as he could assimilate them to his conception of his own attitude ; most forms of art too, in great measure—and music altogether—attracted him in the proportion that they played upon his intimate emotions. Similarly his friendships ; and for this reason he preferred the companionship of women. But since his egoism was uncommonly dexterous, he seemed endowed with a rare gift of artistic perception, of psychological insight, of personal charm.

It had always been his nature to live almost exclusively in the present ; his recollection of past impressions was grown scanty from habitual disuse. His sordid actions in the past he forgot with an ever-increasing facility ; his moments of generosity or self-sacrifice he remembered carelessly, and enjoyed a secret pride in their concealment ; and the conscious embellishment of subjective experience for the purpose of “ copy,” he had instinctively disdained.

Since his boyhood, religion had been distasteful to him, though, at rare moments, it had stirred his sensibilities strangely. Now, occasionally, the thought of the nullity of life, of its great, unsatisfying quality, of the horrid squalor of death,

would descend upon him with its crushing, paralyzing weight ; and he would lament, with bitter, futile regret, his lack of a secure stand-point, and the continual limitations of his self-absorption ; but even that, perhaps, was a mere literary melancholy, assimilated from certain passages by Pierre Loti.

But, now, he had published a stout volume of critical essays, and an important volume of poetry, and society had clamorously ratified his own conception of himself. Certainly, now, in the eyes of the world, it was agreed beyond dispute that she, his wife, was of quite the lesser importance. "She was nice and quiet," which meant that she seemed mildly insignificant ; "she had a sense of humour," which meant that an odd note of half-stifled cynicism sometimes escaped her. He was evidently very devoted to her, and on that account women trusted him—all the more because her personality possessed no obvious glamour. Perhaps, now and then, his attentions to her in public seemed a little ostentatious ; but then, in these modern, uncourtly days, that in itself was distinctive. In private too, especially at the moments when he found life stimulating, he was still tactful and expansive with sympathetic impulse ; from habit ; from pride in his comprehension of women ; from dislike to cheap hypocrisy. How could he have divined that bitter, suppressed seriousness, with which she had taken her disillusionment ; when not once in three months did he consider her apart from the play of his own

personality ; otherwise than in the light of her initial attitude towards him ?

And her disillusionment, how had it come ? Certainly, not with a rush of sudden, overwhelming revelation : certainly, it was in no wise inspired by the tragedy of Nora Helmer. It had been a gradual growth, to whose obscure and trivial beginnings she had not had the learning to ascribe their true significance. To sound the current of life was not her way. She was naïve by nature ; and the ignorance of her girlhood had been due, rather to a natural inobservance, than to carefully-managed surroundings. And yet, she had come to disbelieve in Hillier ; to discredit his clever attractiveness : she had become acutely sensitive to his instability, and, with a secret, instinctive obstinacy, to mistrust the world's praise of his work. Perhaps had he made less effort in the beginning to achieve a brilliancy of attitude in her eyes ; had he schooled her to expect from him a lesser loftiness of aspiration, things might have been very different ; or at least, there might have resulted from the process of her disillusionment a lesser bitterness of conviction. But she had taken her marriage with so keen an earnestness of ideal, had noted every turn in his personality with so intense an expectation. Perhaps, too, had he detected the first totterings of her ideal conception of him ; had he aided her, as it were, to descend his figure from that pedestal, where he himself had originally planted it, together they might have set it un-

injured on a lower and less exposed plane. But he had never heeded her subtle indications of its insecurity: alone, she had watched its peril, awaiting with a frightened fascination the day when it should roll headlong in the dust. And, at intervals, she would vaguely marvel, when she observed others, whose superior perspicacity she assumed, display no perception of his insincerity. Then the oppressive sense that she—she, his wife, the mother of his child—was the only one who saw him clearly, and the unsurmountable shrinking from the relief of sharing this sense with any one, made her sourly sensitive to the pettiness, the meanness, the hidden, tragic element in life.

A gulf had grown between them—that was how she described it to herself. Outwardly their relations remained the same; but, frequently, in his continuance of his former attitude, she detected traces of deliberate effort; frequently, when off his guard, he would abandon all pretension to it, and openly betray how little she had come to mean to him. There were, of course, moments also, when, at the echo of his tenderness, she would feverishly compel herself to believe in its genuineness; but a minute later, he would have forgotten his exaltation, and, almost with irritation, would deliberately ignore the tense yearning that was glowing within her.

And so, the coming of his success—a brilliant blossoming into celebrity—had stirred her but fitfully. Critics wrote of the fine sincerity of his poetry; while she clung obstinately to her super-

stition that fine poetry must be the outcome of a great nobility of character. And, sometimes, she hated all this success of his, because it seemed to emphasize the gulf between them, and, in some inexplicable way, to lessen her value in his eyes : then again, from an impulse of sheer unselfishness, she would succeed in almost welcoming it, because, after all, he was her husband.

But of all this he noted nothing : only now and then he would remind himself vaguely that she had no literary leanings.

The little Claude was three years old. Before his birth, Hillier had dilated much on the mysterious beauty of childhood, had vied with her own awed expectation of the wonderful, coming joy. During her confinement, which had been a severe one, for three nights in succession he had sat, haggard with sleepless anxiety, on a stiff-backed dining-room chair, till all danger was passed. But afterwards, the baby had disappointed him sorely ; and later, she thought he came near actively disliking it. Still, reminding herself of the winsomeness of other children at the first awakening of intelligence, she waited with patient hopefulness, fondly fancying a beautiful boy-child ; wide, baby eyes ; a delicious prattle. Claude, however, attained no prettiness, as he grew : from an unattractive baby he became an unattractive child, with lanky, carrotty hair ; a squat nose ; an ugly, formless mouth. And in addition, he was fretful, mischievous, self-willed. Hillier at this time paid him but a perfunctory attention ;

avoided discussing him ; and, when that was not possible, adopted a subtle, aggrieved tone that cut her to the quick. For she adored the child ; adored him because he was hers ; adored him for his very defects ; adored him because of her own suppressed sadness ; adored him for the prospect of the future—his education, his development, his gradual growth into manhood.

From the house in Cromwell Road the Haseltons had moved to a flat near Victoria Station : their means were moderate ; but now, through the death of a relative, Hillier was no longer dependent upon literature for a living.

III

George Swann was her husband's cousin ; and besides, he had stood godfather to the little Claude. He was the elder by eight years ; but Hillier always treated him as if their ages were reversed, and before Ella, used to nickname him the " Anglo-Saxon," because of his loose, physical largeness, his flaxen hair and beard, his strong simplicity of nature. And Swann, with a reticent good-humour, acquiesced in Hillier's tone towards him ; out of vague regard for his cousin's ability ; out of respect for him as Ella's husband.

Swann and Ella were near friends. Since their first meeting, the combination of his blunt self-possession, and his uncouth timidity with women, had attracted her. Divining his simplicity, she had felt at once at her ease with him, and, treating him with open, cousinly friendliness, had encouraged him to come often to the house.

A while later, a trivial incident confirmed her regard for him. They had been one evening to the theatre together—she and Hillier and Swann—and afterwards, since it was raining, she and Hillier waited under the doorway, while he sallied out into the Strand to find them a cab. Pushing his way along the crowded street, his eyes scanning the

traffic for an empty hansom, he accidentally collided with a woman of the pavement, jostling her off the kerb into the mud of the gutter. Ella watched him stop, gaze ruefully at the woman's splashed skirt, take off his hat and apologize with profuse, impulsive regret. The woman continued her walk, and presently passed the theatre door. She looked middle-aged: her face was hard and animal-like.

One Sunday afternoon—it was summer-time—as she was crossing the Park to pay a call in Gloucester Square, she came across him sauntering alone in Kensington Gardens. She stopped and spoke to him: he seemed much startled to meet her. Three-quarters of an hour later, when she returned, he was sitting on a public bench beside her path; and immediately, from his manner, she half guessed that he had been waiting for her. It was a fortnight after Claude's christening: he started to speak to her of the child, and so, talking together gravely, they turned on to the turf, mounted the slope, and sat down on two chairs beneath the trees.

Touched by his waiting for her, she was anxious to make friends with him; because he was the baby's godfather; because he seemed alone in the world; because she trusted in his goodness. So she led him, directly and indirectly, to talk of himself. At first, in moody embarrassment, he prodded the turf with his stick; and presently responded, unwillingly breaking down his troubled reserve, and

alluding to his loneliness confidently, as if sure of her sympathy.

Unconsciously he made her feel privileged to thus obtain an insight into the inner workings of his heart, and gave her a womanly, sentimental interest in him.

Comely cloud-billows were overhead, and there was not a breath of breeze.

They paused in their talk, and he spoke to her of Kensington Gardens, lovingly, as of a spot which had signified much to him in the past—Kensington Gardens, massively decorous ; ceremoniously quiet ; pompous, courtly as a king's leisure-park ; the slow, opulent contours of portly foliage, sober-green, immobile and indolent ; spacious groupings of tree-trunks ; a low ceiling of leaves ; broad shadows mottling the grass. The Long Water, smooth and dark as a mirror ; lining its banks, the rhododendrons swelling with colour, cream, purple, and carmine. The peacock's insolent scream ; a silently skimming pigeon ; the joyous twitterings of birds ; the patient bleating of sheep. . . .

At last she rose to go. He accompanied her as far as the Albert Memorial, and when he had left her, she realized, with a thrill of contentment, that he and she had become friends.

IV

That had been the beginning of George Swann's great love for her. His was a slowly-moving nature : it was gradually therefore that he came to value, as a matter of almost sacred concern, the sense of her friendship ; reverencing her with the single-hearted, unquestioning reverence of a man unfamiliar with women ; regarding altogether gravely her relations with him — their talks on serious subjects, the little letters she wrote to him, the books that he had given her — Swinburne's *Century of Roundels* ; a tiny edition of Shelley, bound in white parchment ; Mrs. Meynell's *Rhythm of Life*. He took to studying her intellectual tastes, the topics that were congenial to her, her opinions on men and women, with a quiet, plodding earnestness ; almost as if it were his duty. Thus he learned her love of simple country things ; gained a conception of her girlhood's home ; of her father and mother, staid country folk. He did not know how to him alone she could talk of these things ; or of the warm, deep-seated gratitude she bore him in consequence ; but he reverted constantly to the topic, because, under its influence, she always brightened, and it seemed to ratify the bond of sympathy between them.

How much, as the months went by, she came to mean to him, he had not in the least realized : he had never thought of her as playing a part in his own life ; only as a beautiful-natured woman, to whom he owed everything, because, by some strange chance, she had made him her friend.

Not even in his moments of idle, vagrant reverie, did he think to ask more of her than this ; to intrude himself further into her life ; to offer her more than exactly that which she was expecting of him, naturally never occurred to him. Yet, in a queer, uncomfortable way, he was jealous of other men's familiarity with her—vaguely jealous lest they should supplant him, mistrustful of his own modesty. And there was no service which, if she had asked it of him, he would not have accomplished for her sake ; for he had no ties.

But towards Hillier, since he belonged to her, Swann's heart warmed affectionately : she had loved and married him ; had made him master of her life. So he instinctively extended to his cousin a portion of the unspoken devotion inspired by Ella. Such was the extent of his reverence for her, and his diffidence regarding himself, that he took for granted that Hillier was an ideal husband, tender, impelled by her to no ordinary daily devotion : for, that it should be otherwise, would have seemed to him a monstrous improbability. Yet latterly, since the coming of Hillier's success, certain incidents had disconcerted him, filled him with ill-defined uneasiness.

From the first, he had been one of Hillier's warmest admirers ; praising, whenever an opportunity offered, out of sheer loyalty to Ella, and pride in his cousin, the fineness of form that his poetry revealed. To her, when they were alone, he had talked in the same enthusiastic strain : the first time she had seemed listless and tired, and afterwards he had blamed himself for his want of tact ; on another occasion, he had brought her a laudatory article, and she had turned the conversation brusquely into another channel. And, since his love for her—of which as yet he was himself unconscious—caused him to brood over means of pleasing her (he lived alone in the Temple), this indication that he had jarred her sensibilities was not lost upon him.

Hillier's attitude towards the little Claude, and the pain that it was causing her, would in all probability have escaped him, had she not alluded to it once openly, frankly assuming that he had perceived it. It was not indeed that she was in any way tempted to indulge in the transitional treachery of discussing Hillier with him ; but that, distressed, yearning for counsel, she was prompted almost irresistibly to turn to Swann, who had stood godfather to the child, who was ready to join her in forming anxious speculations concerning the future.

For of course he had extended his devotion to the child also, who, at Hillier's suggestion, was taught to call him Uncle George. Naturally his heart went out to children : the little Claude, since

the first awakening of his intelligence, had exhibited a freakish, childish liking for him ; and, in his presence, always assumed something of the winsomeness of other children.

The child's preference for Swann, his shy mistrust of his father, were sometimes awkwardly apparent ; but Hillier, so it seemed to Ella, so far from resenting, readily accepted his cousin's predominance. "Children always instinctively know a good man," he would say, laughing ; and Ella would wince inwardly, discerning, beneath his air of complacent humility, how far apart from her he had come to stand.

Thus, insensibly, Swann had become necessary to her, almost the pivot, as it were, of her life : to muse concerning the nature of his feeling towards her ; to probe its sentimental aspects, to accept his friendship otherwise than with unconscious ease, that was not her way.

But Hillier noted critically how things were drifting, and even lent encouragement to their progress in a way that was entirely unostentatious ; since so cynical an attitude seemed in some measure to justify his own conduct.

V

For he was unfaithful to his wife. It was inevitable that the temptation, in the guise of a craving for change, should come—not from the outside, but from within himself. And he had had no habit of stable purpose with which to withstand it. Not altogether was it a vagrant, generalized lusting after women other than his wife; not a mere harking back to the cruder experiences of his bachelorhood; though, at first, it had seemed so to manifest itself. Rather was it the result of a moody restlessness, of a dissatisfaction (with her, consciously, no; for the more that he sinned against her, the more lovable, precious her figure appeared to him) kindled by continual contact with her natural goodness. It was as if, in his effort to match his personality with hers, he had put too severe a strain upon the better part of him.

He himself had never analyzed the matter more exhaustively than this. The treacherous longing had gripped him at certain moments, holding him helpless as in a vice. He had conceived no reckless passion for another woman: such an eventuality, he dimly surmised, was well-nigh improb-

able. In his case brain domineered over heart : to meet the first outbursting of his adoration for his wife, he had drained every resource of his sentimentality.

Was it then an idle craving for adventure, a school-boy curiosity clamouring for fresh insight into the heart of women? Mere experience was unnecessary for the attainment of comprehension : "to have lived" did not imply "to have understood" : the most pregnant adventures, as he knew, were those which entailed no actual unfaithfulness.

And for these—subtle, psychological intimacies—ample occasion offered. Yet the twist in his nature led him to profess to treat them heedlessly ; and, in reality, to prosecute them with no genuine strenuousness. They would have been obvious lapses : Ella would have been pained, pitied perhaps : from that his vanity and his sham chivalry alike shrank.

His unfaithfulness to her, then, had been prompted by no evident motive. Superficially considered, it seemed altogether gratuitous, meaningless. The world—that is, people who knew him and her—would probably have discredited the story, had it come to be bruited. And this fact he had not omitted to consider.

She, the other woman, was of little importance. She belonged to the higher walks of the demi-monde : she was young ; beautiful too, in a manner ; light-hearted ; altogether complaisant.

She was not the first: there had been others before her; but these were of no account whatsoever: they had but represented the bald fact of his unfaithfulness. But *she* attracted him: he returned to her again and again; though afterwards, at any rate in the beginning, he was wont to spare himself little in the matter of self-reproach, and even to make some show of resisting the temptation. The discretion of her cynical camaraderie, however, was to be trusted; and that was sufficient to undermine all virtuous resolution. She had the knack, too, of cheering him when depressed, and, curiously enough, of momentarily reinstating him in his own conceit, though, later, on his return to Ella, he would suffer most of the pangs of remorse.

There was something mannish about her—not about her physiognomy, but about her mind—derived, no doubt, from the scantiness of her intercourse with women. Her cynicism was both human and humorous: she was a person of little education, and betrayed none of the conventionality of her class: hence her point of view often struck him as oddly direct and unexpected. He used to talk to her about himself, candidly discussing all manner of random and intimate matters before her, without shyness on his part, without surprise on hers—almost at times as if she were not present—and with an assumption of facile banter, to listen to which tickled his vanity. Only to Ella did he never allude; and in this, of course,

she tacitly acquiesced. She possessed a certain quality of sympathetic tact; always attentive to his talk, never critical of it; mindful of all that he had previously recounted. He could always resume his attitude at the very point where he had abandoned it. Between them there was never any aping of sentimentality.

That she comprehended him—with so fatuous a delusion he never coquetted: nor that she interested him as a curious type. She saw no subtle significance in his talk: she understood nothing of its complex promptings: she was ordinary, uneducated, and yet stimulating—that was the contrast which attracted him towards her. Concerning the course of her own existence he did not trouble himself: he accepted her as he found her; deriving a sense of security from the fact that towards him her manner varied but little from visit to visit. But, as these accumulated, becoming more and more regular, and his faith in her discretion blunted the edge of his remorse, he came to notice how she braced him, reconciled him to his treachery; (which, he argued, in any case was inevitable) lent to it a spice almost of pleasantness. Neither had he misgivings of the future, of how it would end. One day she would pass out of his life as easily as she had come into it. His relations with her were odd, though not in the obvious way. About the whole thing he was insensibly coming to feel composed.

And its smoothness, its lack of a disquieting

aspect, impelled him to persevere towards Ella in cheerfulness, courteous kindness, and a show of continuous affection ; and to repent altogether of those lapses into roughness which had marred the first months of their marriage.

VI

The hansoms whirled their yellow, gleaming eyes down West : hot, flapping gusts went and returned aimlessly ; and the mirthless twitterings of the women fell abruptly on the sluggishly shuffling crowd. All the sin of the city seemed crushed to listlessness ; vacantly wistful, the figures waited by the street corners.

Then the storm burst. Slow, ponderous drops ; a clap of the thunder's wrath ; a crinkled rim of light, unveiling a slab of sky, throbbing, sullen and violet ; small, giggling screams of alarm, and a stampede of bunched silhouettes. The thunder clapped again, impatient and imperious ; and the rain responded, zealously hissing. Bright stains of liquid gold straggled across the roadway ; a sound of splashing accompanied the thud of hoofs, the rumble of wheels, the clanking of chains, and the ceaseless rattle of the drops on the hurried procession of umbrellas.

Swann, from the corner of a crowded omnibus, peered absently through the doorway, while the conductor, leaning into the street, touted mechanically for passengers.

The vehicle stopped. A woman, bare-headed and cloaked, escorted by the umbrella of a

restaurant official, hurried to the shelter of a cab, across the wet pavement. A man broke the stream of the hastening crowd ; halted beside the wheel to stare. The woman laughed in recognition, noisily. The man stepped rapidly on to the foot-board, and an instant stood there, directing the driver across the roof. The light from a lamp-post caught his face: it was Hillier. The next moment he was seated beside the woman, who was still laughing (Swann could see the gleaming whiteness of her teeth): the driver had loosened the window strap, the glass had slid down, shutting them in. The omnibus jolted forward, and the cab followed in its wake, impatiently, for the street was blocked with traffic.

Immediately, with a fierce vividness, Ella's image sprang up before Swann's eyes—her face with all its pure, natural, simple sweetness. And there—not ten yards distant, behind the obscurity of that blurred glass, Hillier was sitting with another woman—a woman concerning whose status he could not doubt.

He clenched his gloved fists. The wild impulse spurted forth, the impulse to drag the cur from the cab, to bespatter him, to throw him into the mud, to handle him brutally, as he deserved. It was as though Hillier had struck him a cowardly blow in the face.

Then the hansom started to creep past the omnibus. Swann sprang into the roadway. A moment later he was inside another cab, whirling in pursuit down Piccadilly hill.

The horse's hoofs splashed with a rhythmical, accelerated precision: he noticed dully how the crupper-strap flapped from side to side, across the animal's back. Ahead, up the incline, pairs of tiny specks, red and green, were flitting.

"It's the cab with the lady what come out of the restaurant, ain't it, sir?"

"Yes," Swann called back through the trap.

The reins tightened: the horse quickened his trot.

Hyde Park Corner stood empty and resplendent with a glitter of glamorous gold. The cab turned the corner of Hamilton Place, and the driver lashed the horse into a canter up Park Lane.

"That's 'im—jest in front——"

"All right. Follow," Swann heard himself answering. And, amid his pain, he was conscious that the man's jaunty tone seemed to indicate that this sort of job was not unfamiliar.

He struggled to tame the savageness of his indignation; to think out the situation; to realize things coolly, that he might do what was best for her. But the leaping recollection of all her trustfulness, her goodness, filled him with a burning, maddening compassion. . . . He could see nothing but the great wrong done to her. . . .

Where were they going—the green lights of that cab in front—that woman and Hillier? . . . Where would it end, this horrible pursuit—this whirling current which was sweeping him forward? . . . It was like a nightmare. . . .

He must stop them—prevent this thing but, evidently, this was not the first time. . . . Hillier and this woman knew one another. He had stopped on catching sight of her, and she had recognized him. . . . The thing might have been going on for weeks—for months. . . .

. . . . Yet he must stop them—not here, in the crowded street (they were in the Edgware Road), but later, when they had reached their destination—where there were no passers—where it could be done without scandal. . . .

. . . . Yes, he must send Hillier back to her. . . . And she believed in him—trusted him. . . . She must know nothing—at all costs, he must spare her the hideous knowledge—the pain of it. . . . And yet—and yet? . . . Hillier—the blackguard—she would have to go on living with him, trusting him, confiding in him, loving him. . . .

And for relief he returned wearily to his indignation.

How was it possible for any man—married to her—to be so vile, so false? . . . The consummate hypocrisy of it all. . . .

Swann remembered moments when Hillier's manner towards her had appeared redolent of deference, of suppressed affection. And he—a man of refinement—not a mere coarse-fibred, sensual brute—he who wrote poetry—Swann recalled a couplet full of fine aspiration—that he should have done this loathsome thing—done it callously, openly—

any one might have seen it—deceived her for some common, vulgar, public creature. . . .

Suddenly the cab halted abruptly.

“They’re pulled up, across the street there,” the driver whispered hoarsely, confidentially ; and for his tone Swann could have struck him.

It was an ill-lit street, silent and empty. The houses were low, semi-detached, and separated from the pavement by railing and small gardens.

The woman had got out of the cab and was pushing open the swing-gate. Hillier stood on the foot-board, paying the cabman. Swann, on the opposite side of the street, hesitated. Hillier stepped on to the pavement, and ran lightly up the door-step after the woman. She unlocked the door : it closed behind them. And the hansom which had brought them turned, and trotted away down the street.

Swann stood a moment before the house, irresolute ; then re-crossed the street slowly. And a hansom, bearing a second couple, drew up at the house next door.

VII

"You can go to bed, Hodgson. I will turn off the light."

The man retired silently. It was a stage-phrase that rose unconsciously to his lips, a stage-situation with which she was momentarily toying.

Alone, she perceived its absurd unreality. Nothing, of course, would happen to-night : though so many days and nights she had been waiting. The details of life were clumsy, cumbersome : the simplification of the stage, of novels, of dozing dreams, seemed, by contrast, bitterly impossible.

She took up the book again, and read on, losing herself for a while in the passion of its pages—a passion that was all glamorous, sentimental felicity, at once vague and penetrating. But, as she paused to reach a paper-knife, she remembered the irrevocable, prosaic groove of existence, and that slow drifting to a dreary commonplace—a commonplace that was *hers*—brought back all her aching listlessness. She let the book slip to the carpet.

Love, she repeated to herself, a silken web, opal-tinted, veiling all life ; love, bringing fragrance and radiance ; love, with the moonlight streaming across the meadows ; love, amid summer-leaved woods, a-sparkle in the morning sun ; a simple

clasping of hands ; a happiness, child-like and thoughtless, secure and intimate. . . .

And she—she had nothing—only the helpless child ; her soul was brave and dismantled and dismal ; and once again started the gnawing of humiliation—inferior even to the common people, who could be loved and forget, in the midst of promiscuous squalor. Without love, there seemed no reason for life.

Away her thoughts sailed to the tale of the fairy-prince, stepping to shore in his silver armour, come to deliver and to love. She would have been his in all humility, waited on him in fearful submission ; she would have asked for nought but his love.

Years ago, once or twice, men had appeared to her like that. And Hillier, before they were married, when they were first engaged. A strange girl she must have been in those days ! And now,—now they were like any husband and any wife.

“ It happened by chance,” the old tale began. Chance ! Yes, it was chance that governed all life ; mocking, ironical chance, daintily sportive chance, hobbled to the clumsy mechanism of daily existence.

Twelve o'clock struck. Ten minutes more perhaps, and Hillier would be home. She could hear his tread ; she could see him enter, take off his coat and gloves gracefully, then lift her face lightly in his two hands, and kiss her on the forehead. He would ask for an account of her day's

doings; but he would never heed her manner of answering, for he would have begun to talk of himself. And altogether complacently would he take up the well-worn threads of their common life.

And she would go on waiting, and trifling with hopelessness, for in real life such things were impossible. Men were dull and incomplete, and could not understand a woman's heart. . . .

And so she would wait, till he came in, and when he had played his part, just as she had imagined he would play it, she would follow him, in dumb docility, up-stairs to bed. . . .

* * * * *

It was past one o'clock when he appeared. She had fallen asleep in the big arm-chair: her book lay in a heap on the carpet beside her. He crossed the room, but she did not awake.

One hand hung over the arm of the chair, limp and white and fragile; her head, bent over her breast, was coyly resting in the curve of her elbow; her hair was a little dishevelled; her breathing was soft and regular, like a child's.

He sat down noiselessly, awed by this vision of her. The cat, which had lain stretched on the hearth-rug, sprang into his lap, purring and caressing. He thought it strange that animals had no sense of human sinfulness, and recalled the devotion of the dog of a prostitute, whom he had known years and years ago. . . .

He watched her, and her unconsciousness loosed within him the sickening pangs of remorse. . . .

He mused vaguely on suicide as the only fitting termination. . . . And he descended to cheap anathemas upon life. . . .

* * * * *

By-and-bye she awoke, opening her eyes slowly, wonderingly. He was kneeling before her, kissing her hand with reverential precaution.

She saw tears in his eyes: she was still scarcely awake: she made no effort to comprehend; only was impulsively grateful, and slipping her arms behind his head, drew him towards her and kissed him on the eyes. He submitted, and a tear moistened her lips.

Then they went up-stairs.

And she, passionately clutching at every memory of their love, feverishly cheated herself into bitter self-upbraiding, into attributing to him a nobility of nature that set him above all other men. And he, at each renewed outburst of her wild straining towards her ideal, suffered as if she had cut his bare flesh with a whip.

It was his insistent attitude of resentful humility that finally wearied her of the fit of false exaltation. When she sank to sleep, the old ache was at her heart.

VIII

Swann strode into the room. Hillier looked up at him from his writing-table in unfeigned surprise ; greeted him cordially, with a couple of trite, cheery remarks concerning the weather, then waited abruptly for an explanation of this morning visit ; for Swann's trouble was written on his face.

" You look worried. Is there anything wrong ? " Hillier asked presently.

" Yes."

" Well, can I do anything ? If I can be of any service to you, old fellow, you know I——"

" I discovered last night what a damned black-guard you are." He spoke savagely, as if his bluntness exulted him : his tone quivered with suppressed passion.

Hillier, with a quick movement of his head, flinched as if he had been struck in the face. And the lines about his mouth were set rigidly.

There was a long, tense silence. Hillier was drawing circles on a corner of the blotting-pad ; Swann was standing over him, glaring at him with a fierce, hateful curiosity. Hillier became conscious of the other's expression, and his fist clenched obviously.

"I saw you get into a cab with that woman," Swann went on. "I was in an omnibus going home. I followed you—drove after you. I wanted to stop you—to stop it—I was too late."

"Ah!" An exasperated, sneering note underlined the exclamation. Hillier drove the pen-point into the table. The nib curled and snapped.

The blood rushed to Swann's forehead. In a flash he caught a glimpse of the thought that had crossed Hillier's mind. It was like a personal indignity; he struggled desperately to control himself.

Hillier looked straight into his cousin's distorted face. At the sight the tightness about his own mouth slackened. His composure returned.

"I'm sorry. Forgive me," he said simply.

"How can you be such a brute?" Swann burst out unheeding. "Don't you care? Is it nothing to you to wreck your wife's whole happiness—to spoil her life, to break her heart, to deceive her in the foulest way, to lie to her? Haven't you any conscience, any chivalry?"

The manly anguish in his voice was not lost upon Hillier. He thought he realized clearly how it was for Ella, and not for him, that Swann was so concerned. Once more he took stock of his cousin's agitation, and a quick glitter came into his eyes. He felt as if a mysterious force had been suddenly given to him. Still he said nothing.

"How could you, Hillier? How came you to do it?"

"Sit down." He spoke coldly, clearly, as if he were playing a part which he knew well.

Swann obeyed mechanically.

"It's perfectly natural that you should speak to me like that. You take the view of the world. The view of the world I accept absolutely. Certainly I am utterly unworthy of Ella" (he mentioned her name with a curious intonation of assertive pride). "How I have sunk to this thing—the whole story of how I have come to risk my whole happiness for the sake of another woman, who is nothing—absolutely nothing—to me, to whom I am nothing, I won't attempt to explain. Did I attempt to do so, I see little probability of your understanding it, and little to be gained even if you did so. I choose to let it remain for you a piece of incomprehensible infamy: I have no wish to alter your view of me."

"You don't care you've no remorse you're callous and cynical. . . . Good God! it's awful."

"Yes, Swann, I care," Hillier resumed, lowering his voice, and speaking with a slow distinctness, as if he were putting an excessive restraint upon his emotions. "I care more than ever you or any one will ever know."

"It's horrible. . . . I don't know what to think. . . . Don't you see the awfulness of your wife's position? . . . Don't you realize the hideousness of what you've done?"

"My dear Swann, nobody is more alive to the

consequences of what I've done than I am. I have behaved infamously—I don't need to be told that by you. And whatever comes to me out of this thing" (he spoke with a grave, resigned sadness) "I shall bear it."

"Good God! Can you think of nothing but yourself? Can't you see that you've been a miserable, selfish beast—that what happens to you matters nothing? Can't you see that the only thing that matters is your wife? You're a miserable, skulking cur. . . . She trusted you—she believed in you, and you've done her an almost irreparable wrong."

Hillier stood suddenly erect.

"What I have done, Swann, is more than a wrong. It is a crime. Within an hour of your leaving this room, I shall have told Ella everything. That is the only thing left for me to do, and I shall not shirk it. I shall take the full responsibility. You did right to come to me as you did. You are right to consider me a miserable, skulking cur" (he brought the words out with an emphasized bravery). "Now you can do no more. The remainder of the matter rests between me and my wife——"

He paused.

"And to think that you——" Swann began passionately.

"There is no object to be gained by our discussing the matter further," Hillier interrupted a little loudly, but with a concentrated calm. "There

is no need for you to remain here longer." He put his thumb to the electric-bell.

"The maid will be here in a moment to show you out," he added.

Swann waited, blinking with hesitation. His personality seemed to be slipping from him.

"You are going to tell her?" he repeated slowly.

The door opened : he hurried out of the room.

The outer door slammed : Hillier's face turned a sickly white ; his eyes dilated, and he laughed excitedly—a low, short, hysterical laugh. He looked at the clock : the whole scene had lasted but ten minutes. He pulled a chair to the fire, and sat staring at the flames moodily. . . . The tension of the dramatic situation snapped. Before his new prospect, once again he thought weakly of suicide. . . .

IX

He had told her—not, of course, the whole story—from that his sensitivity had shrunk. Still he had besmirched himself bravely; he had gone through with the interview not without dignity. Beforehand he had nerved himself for a terrible ordeal; yet, somehow, as he reviewed it, now that it was all over, the scene seemed to have fallen flat. The tragedy of her grief, of his own passionate repentance, which he had been expecting, had proved unaccountably tame. She had cried, and at the sight of those tears of hers he had suffered intensely; but she had displayed no suppressed, womanish jealousy; had not, in her despair, appeared to regard his confession as an overwhelming shattering of her faith in him, and so provoked him to reveal the depth of his anguish. He had implored her forgiveness; he had vowed he would efface the memory of his treachery; she had acquiesced dreamily, with apparent heroism. There had been no mention of a separation.

And now the whole thing was ended: to-night he and she were dining out.

He was vaguely uncomfortable; yet his heart was full of a sincere repentance, because of the loosening of the strain of his anxiety; because of

the smarting sense of humiliation, when he recollected Swann's words ; because he had caused her to suffer in a queer, inarticulate way, which he did not altogether understand, of which he was vaguely afraid. . . .

X

When at last he had left her alone, it was with a curious calmness that she started to reflect upon it all. She supposed it was very strange that his confession had not wholly prostrated her; and glancing furtively backwards, catching a glimpse of her old girlish self, wondered listlessly how it was that, insensibly, all these months, she had grown so hardened. . . .

* * * * *

By-and-bye, the recent revelation of his unfaithfulness seemed to recede slowly into the misty past, and, fading, losing its sharpness of outline, its distinctness of detail, to resemble an irreparable fact to which familiarity had inured her.

And all the uneasiness of her mistrustfulness, the pain of her fluctuating doubtings ceased; her comprehension of him was all at once clarified, rendered vivid and indisputable; and she was conscious of a certain sense of relief. She was eased of those feverish, spasmodic gaspings of her half-starved love; at first the dullness of sentimental atrophy seemed the more endurable. She jibed at her own natural artlessness; and insisted to herself that she wanted no fool's paradise, that she was even glad to see him as he really was, to

terminate, once for all, this futile folly of love ; that, after all, his unfaithfulness was no unusual and terrible tragedy, but merely a commonplace chapter in the lives of smiling, chattering women, whom she met at dinners, evening parties, and balls. . . .

* * * * *

There were some who simpered to her over Hillier as a model of modern husbands ; and she must go on listening and smiling. . . .

. . . And the long years ahead would unroll themselves—a slow tale of decorous lovelessness. . .

He would be always the same—that was the hardest to face. His nature could never alter, grow into something different never, never change always, always the same. . . .

Oh ! it made her dread it all—the restless round of social enjoyments ; the greedy exposure of the petty weaknesses of common acquaintance ; the ill-natured atmosphere that she felt emanating from people herded together. . . . All the details of her London life looked unreal, mean, pitiful. . . .

And she longed after the old days of her girlhood, of the smooth, staid country life ; she longed after the simple, restful companionship of her old father and mother ; after the accumulation of little incidents that she had loved long ago. . . . She longed too—and the straining at heart-strings grew tenser—she longed after her own lost maidenhood ; she longed to be ignorant and careless ; to see life once again as a simple, easy matter ; to

know nothing of evil ; to understand nothing of men ; to trust—to trust unquestioningly. . . . All that was gone ; she herself was all changed ; those days could never come again. . . .

And she cried to herself a little, from weakness of spirit, softly. . . .

* * * * *

Then, gradually, out of the weary turmoil of her bitterness, there came to her a warm impulse of vague sympathy for the countless, unknown tragedies at work around her : she thought of the sufferings of outcast women—of loveless lives, full of mirthless laughter ; she thought of the long loneliness of childless women. . . .

She clutched for consolation at the unhappiness of others ; but she only discovered the greater ugliness of the world. And she returned to a tired contemplation of her own prospect. . . .

* * * * *

He had broken his vows to her—not only the solemn vow he had taken in the church (she recalled how his voice had trembled with emotion, as he had repeated the words)—but all that passionate series of vows he had made to her during the spring-time of their love. . . .

. . . Yes, that seemed the worst part of it—that, and not the making love to another woman. . . . What was she like ? . . . What was it in her that had attracted him ? . . . Oh ! but what did that matter ? . . . —only why were men's natures so different from women's ? . . .

. . . Now, she must go on—go on alone. Since her marriage she had lost the habit of daily converse with Christ: here in London, somehow, He had seemed so distant, so difficult of approach. . . .

. . . She must just go on. . . . She had the little Claude. . . . It was to help her that God had given her Claude. . . . Oh! she would pray to God to make him good—to give him a straight, strong, upright, honest nature. And herself, every day, she would watch over his growth, guide him, teach him. . . . Yes, he *must* grow up good into boyhood different from other boys into manhood, simple, honourable manhood. . . . She would be everything to him: he and she would come to comprehend each other, to read into each other's hearts. . . . Perhaps, between them, would spring up perfect love and trust. . . .

XI

Swann had written to her :—

“You are in trouble : let me come.”

Gradually, between the lines of the note, she understood it all—she read how his love for her had leapt up, now that he knew that she was unhappy ; how he wanted to be near her, to comfort her, and perhaps perhaps

She was filled with great sorrow for him—and warm gratitude, too, for his simple, single-hearted love—but sorrow, that she could give him nothing in return, and because it seemed that, somehow, he and she were about to bid one another good-bye : she thought she dimly foresaw how their friendship was doomed to dwindle. . . .

So she let him come.

* * * * *

. . . And all this she fancied she read again in the long, grave glance of his greeting, and the firm clasp of his big hand.

When he spoke, his deep, steady voice dominated her : she knew at once that he would do what was right.

“Ella, my poor Ella, how brave you are !” She looked up at him, smiling tremulously, through her quick-starting tears. . . . The next moment it

was as if the words had escaped him—almost as if he regretted them.

He sat down opposite her, and, lightening his voice, asked—just as he always did—for news of the little Claude.

And so their talk ran on.

After awhile, she came to realize that he meant to say no more: the strength of his great reserve became apparent, and a sense of peace stole over her. He talked on, and to the restful sound of his clear, strong voice, she abandoned herself dreamily. . . . This he had judged the better course that he should have adopted any other now seemed inconceivable. Beside him she felt weak and helpless: she remembered the loneliness of his life: he seemed to her altogether noble; and she was vaguely remorseful that she had not perceived from the first that it was from him that her help would come. . . .

She divined, too, the fineness of his sacrifice—that manly, human struggle with himself, through which he had passed to attain it—how he had longed for the right to make her his and how he had renounced. The sureness of his victory, and the hidden depths of his nature which it revealed, awed her now he would never swerve from what he knew to be right. . . . And on, through those years to come, she could trust him, always, always. . . .

. . . At last he bid her good-bye: even at the last his tone remained unchanged.

It was close upon seven o'clock. She went up-stairs to dress for dinner, and kneeling beside the bed, prayed to God with an outburst of passionate, pulsing joy. . . .

Ten minutes later Hillier came in from his dressing-room. He clasped his hands round her bare neck, kissing her hair again and again.

"I have been punished, Nellie," he began in a broken whisper. "Good God ! it is hard to bear. . . . Help me, Nellie help me to bear it."

She unclasped his fingers, and started to stroke them ; a little mechanically, as if it were her duty to ease him of his pain. . . .

BATTLEDORE AND SHUTTLECOCK

I

"YOU may smoke, you know, Ron, if you like. I'm afraid I haven't any cigarettes, though."

"All right. I've got some here."

He dipped a spill into the grate, and stretching himself on the hearthrug in front of her, steadied the flame. Helen fell to musing on the gracefulness of the attitude he unconsciously adopted, the natural nobility that, despite their boyish indecision, his features suggested.

"Make haste, or you'll burn your fingers," she exclaimed.

He puffed vigorously, for the paper was almost consumed ; then gazed up at her in frank scrutiny.

"Well, what are you thinking about me ?" She smiled ; her voice was soft and leisurely.

Blinking with surprise, he dropped his cigarette into the fender, and sat up, clasping his hands round his knees.

"How on earth did you know that ?"

"It wasn't so very difficult to guess. Now tell me ; I'm very curious to know."

"I was thinking how glad I am I've come to live here," he said simply.

"You dear boy!" She was flushing with quick pleasure.

"You see, Helen," he continued seriously, "I should have been beastly dull all alone, and you have to know a man awfully well before you can go into rooms with him. I found that out at Oxford. I used to wonder a great deal what it would be like, my living with you. I think you're changed tremendously."

"Changed—how?"

"I don't know exactly, it's so difficult to explain. But in the old days—that time you came down to Battlebury—you seemed just the same as all other girls. You're absolutely different now. I think it is," he stumbled over his thoughts, "that you're more like a man than any one I've known. I mean I felt at home with you at once, just as if we were old friends. Most women are so silly to talk to."

"What a queer boy you are!" she laughed.

"I'm not queer a bit," he retorted, picking up the cigarette. "I'm only just a rather dense, ordinary sort of chap."

"So you're really glad you've come?"

"Rather. But I don't mind telling you now that I didn't care much for the idea, when you first wrote about it from India. I wanted to be independent. I was sick of being looked after."

"What made you change your mind?"

"Oh, several things. That second letter you wrote me. I thought you'd be lonely perhaps, now—now that——" He sent her a quick, shy glance.

"Dear!" Her hand stretched out towards his. "You're right. I did feel utterly lonely; as if the world had suddenly grown empty all around me. And Hal, just before he died—almost the last words"—(her voice was quavering) "said, 'When you get back look after Ronald.' We often talked about you, and he used to wait for your letters so eagerly. He was so fond of you."

Ronald stared stiffly into the fire, struggling with his emotion.

Presently he perceived her eyes glistening.

"Oh! I'm so awfully sorry—I didn't mean to make you cry. What a stupid ass I am!"

"No, dear, it's not your fault. It's nothing. You couldn't help it. Go on talking. It's better to talk about these things."

"I wish I remembered Hal better," he began gravely, after a pause. "You see it's nine years since he went away. I was a lower-boy at Eton then. He and I never saw very much of each other; he was so much older. I used to think about him a good deal though, after mother died. I suppose it was having to be alone with father. That was a beastly time. I used to mark off the days till I went back to Eton on a calendar."

"Why, didn't you get on with your father?"

"Get on with him—no, I never did. I dare say

you'll think I oughtn't to talk like this, but I can't help it. Directly I get into the same room with him I feel uncomfortable."

"Oh, Ronald: what a pity!"

"I dare say it's all my fault; but it's just as if I had to bottle myself up, and pretend to see everything just as he does. He makes me feel ever so far beneath him. It was always the same."

"But hadn't you any friends down there?"

"No; no one much. Sometimes some of my Eton friends came to stay; but he always used to treat me before them as if I was a little school-boy—and them too sometimes. I hated it awfully, and of course I never could do anything. You can't imagine how keen fellows at school are about their people."

"And after—when you went to Oxford?"

"Oh! then I used to stay about with people as much as I could. One summer I went on a walking tour round the west coast of Scotland, with a sort of tutor. We had a ripping time. Of course one had an enormous number of friends up at Oxford. That's the worst of Oxford, one knows such a crowd of men. But they're all so much alike, Oxford men, I think. They all say the same things."

* * * * *

She rose presently from her chair, to look at the clock.

"Why, it's eleven already. What time would you like to breakfast to-morrow?"

"Well, I've got to be at the crammer's at half-past nine."

"Shall I order it for half-past eight then?"

"That'll do splendidly."

"Good-night, Ronald."

"Good-night," he answered a little awkwardly, jumping to his feet.

Her hand lingered affectionately in his.

"Put out the lamp when you go up," she added, at the door.

II

When Helen awoke next morning, her first thought was of Ronald. Like a ray of glad sunshine, it came to her. She looked forward eagerly to the companionship of this first breakfast with him, impatient to begin the routine of the life together. So she hurried over her dressing that she might get down-stairs quickly, to greet him.

She was tall and loosely-knit; flaxen hair, a swinging gait, and a large simplicity of gesture that seemed inappropriately clothed in widow's weeds. Her features, though faulty and individually insignificant, achieved, in their combination, an immediate charm, by means of the rare spontaneity, fearlessness almost, of regard.

Her marriage with Ronald's elder brother had been an unison almost without flaw. In the gentleness of his unsoiled instincts, backed by sheer robustness, she had definitely realized her ideal of the lovable in man. Alone with him in a beautiful and remote station, where the sequence of dreamy, uneventful days cheated the flight of time, she had drifted, unchecked, into an entire merging of herself in the play of his personality. For she had no child.

Later, when they removed to Calcutta, amid the

novelty of strange faces, social tasks, and the annual summer separation, their intimacy was securely sealed, beyond danger of damage.

It was in the spring of the third year there that he died, at the end of five days' fever.

During the night after the funeral, she attempted to take poison; the thought that she was left behind maddened her. There followed a long period of nervous prostration and emotional numbness, while time built for her a barrier between the present and the past.

When she was herself again, she was conscious of but one desire—to avoid the faces who had known him, to be alone with her sorrow. By-and-bye, vague, filtering hopes of relief by the side of his young brother Ronald roused her. She started for England. Sometimes, during the voyage, sitting on deck, watching the lazy rhythm of blue billows, she dimly foresaw how, if the boy failed her, life would be altogether dismal and bare. Then the intolerable ache of yearning would start again, the sickening remembrance that Hal was gone, gone for always, that it was over, that it could never be again. It was but listlessly that she clutched at belief in a meeting after death; she could not escape from the near presence of the irrevocable.

But when Ronald arrived from Oxford, to live with her in her new London house, while he worked for his army examination, her torpor lifted, like a murky fog-curtain, and she beheld the world

a-glitter once more. A haze settled down over the memories of the past, blurring their edge, and the traces of her sorrow faded, leaving her bright with vitality.

While she was coiling her hair, she saw him again, as a lanky, unattractive boy, who was stubbornly rude to her because she was engaged to his elder brother. Once Hal had boxed his ears, and sent him in to her to apologize. He stood sheepishly in the doorway, his face aflame, throwing his excuse at her defiantly. And before she could attempt to soothe him, he was gone in ruffled dignity.

How like he had grown to Hal—a certain poise of the head, certain tones of his voice! At first she had recoiled from this resemblance; but now, she was happy in brooding on it. For it removed the strained sense of strangeness, and swathed in a soft tint of melancholy the prospect of her affection for him.

III

Ronald adapted himself to his new surroundings with the quick pliability of youth still innocent of habit ; traversing in the transition from boisterous irresponsibility to the restraint of routine no intermediary period of restlessness. The repetition of the daily morning walk to his crammer's ; of the return across the Park, all wrapped in the drab haze of lingering day ; of the uneventful evenings, when, lulled to drowsy contentment by the day's work, he talked idly to Helen—he accepted its whole quiet monotony with easy cheerfulness.

And he grew to enjoy the hours spent with her. Little by little she encouraged him to assume with her small airs of authority, almost of proprietorship ; to insist on her wearing furs when the wind was bitter, or thick boots when the streets were wet. Thus she made him conscious of his male superiority, impregnating with a subtle charm the novelty of his independence. He thought now of his father's attitude towards him with aggressive disgust. Feminine companionship was new to him, and close familiarity with her provoked in him a vague, questioning interest in womankind. His consciousness of sex slept less soundly.

Meanwhile, stimulated by pride in his own

conscientiousness, he accomplished his daily tasks thoroughly ; looking forward to his profession eagerly, stirred when a regiment passed him in the park, discussing with Helen historical campaigns. Several of the faces at the crammer's were familiar to him ; but he purposely restricted all intercourse to conventional greetings ; flat comments on the weather or the work ; curt, mutual recollections of Oxford men. All proposals for evening amusements he declined, unwilling for change.

IV

One evening, when they had finished dinner, Helen retired to her room. Ronald sat for a while in the drawing-room fidgeting with his note-books. He was sick of work, sick of the sight of the shiny covers. The sense of cramping confinement chafed him, his legs tingled with pent-up energy, he was eager for activity. He left the house. Tightening his sinews, stiffening his shoulder, ready from sheer excess of vigour to buffet the passers, he strode along.

* * * * *

Immediately he entered the theatre, the sudden sight of the scene stopped him, revealed, as it were, through a great gap. The stage blazed white; masses of recumbent girls, bathed in soft tints, swayed to dreamy cadence of muffled violins, before the quivering, gold-flecked minarets of an Eastern palace. He leaned against the side of the lounge to gaze down across the black belt of heads. The sight bewildered him. By-and-bye he became conscious of a hum of voices and a continual movement behind him. He turned to look.

Men, for the most part in evening dress, were passing in procession to and fro, some women amongst them, smiling as they twittered mirthlessly;

now and then he caught glimpses of others seated before little round tables ; vacant, impassive, like wax-work figures, he thought. He felt ill-at-ease, almost wished he had not come in. A vision of Helen, pale with headache, flitted before his mind's eye, succeeded by a glimmering perception of the sense of things. He started in chase of this fleeting perception, only to entangle himself amidst the incoherence of novel sensation. Then his face grew hot, the gaze of one of the seated figures was upon him ; he turned hastily back to the stage.

He was throbbing with trepidating curiosity, buffeted by irresolution. The music clashed triumphantly, and the dancers massed together, formed a solid, whirling wheel of glittering humanity. Exhilaration and a quiet, tense composure took possession of him. As he faced round again his foot encountered an obstacle.

"I beg your pardon." The exclamation came mechanically.

"It didn't hurt a bit."

Amusement was dancing in her big, baby eyes, and friendliness on her open lips. The strains of the band, the restless flow around him, everything vanished ; he was only aware of her face sparkling upon him.

The ceasing of her voice nipped the spell, and he dropped back to consciousness of the external. He comprehended in a flash that he was talking to a girl in the lounge of a music-hall. And the image of Helen flitted past, almost unobserved.

Beside the girl he felt himself clumsy and clownish ; he recollected his muddy boots.

"Have you been here before?" she was asking him.

He was busy noting her large-brimmed, black velvet hat ; the soft duskiness of her skin, which a feather boa caressed ; her white, tight-fitting gloves, and the gold bangles on her wrists.

"No, I've only just come," he answered.

Her face still sparkled.

"Have you been here long?" he stammered.

She had not heard him ; she was smiling across at some one in the crowd. He imagined that she was slipping from him, and roused himself rudely from his contemplation.

"Aren't there any seats?" His eyes pretended to search the balcony ostentatiously ; but in reality everything appeared blurred.

"Let's go and see," she suggested, bringing her glance back to him.

They moved to the gangway, and he sat down beside her in the back row. Her tiny, shell-like ear held his gaze, while he beat his brain for some remark which would cause her to think well of him.

"Did you see the performing birds?" she said. "I love birds. I've got one at home. He sings beautifully."

"No, I didn't see them. Were they good?"

"There are two pigeons, who draw a carriage with some dressed-up sparrows in it, right round the stage."

"By Jove! I wish I'd seen that."

"They've been going on a long while. Haven't you been here before?"

"No."

"Do you generally go to the Alhambra?"

"No, I've not been there either yet. I've only been in town a short while, you see. And I'm working very hard."

"You're in business?"

"No, I'm going in for an exam—for the army."

"Is it very difficult?"

"Yes. You see one has to know such a lot of different things."

"You're awfully young," she said presently.

He reddened, apprehensive of her disapprobation.

"Yes, awfully young," she concluded decisively.

She seemed to be thinking to herself. The music had softened again. She was beautiful, he thought, and abandoned himself to the glow of pride at being with her.

"What's your name?" she asked.

"Ronald Thornycroft. And—will you tell me yours?"

"Midge."

"Midge—what?"

"Midge—that's all—nothing else." Her face was sparkling upon him, as when she had first spoken to him. "Do you know any of the girls here?" she began.

"No—do you?"

"Do you live by yourself?"

"Yes, mostly ; my father lives in the country and my mother is dead."

"I'm so sorry," she exclaimed. Her tone troubled him instantly ; her face, he saw, had grown quite grave.

"It's a long time ago," he explained. Their eyes met, and she smiled at him again.

"Do you know, I'm going home next month—down to the country. I love the country."

"So do I," he answered.

"And the sea-side ? Do you care for the sea-side ?"

"I don't know. I haven't been there much."

"I was down there in the summer. I'm awfully fond of the roar of the waves and the wind, when the sea gets black and angry, and seems to show its teeth."

The music crashed before stopping ; the curtain slid down.

"Shall we go back ? The ballet's over. Lend me your programme."

He waited while she wrote with a tiny silver pencil-case. As they regained the lounge, she thrust the programme into his hand, saying—

"There's my address."

He took it and moved forward to a clear space. When he turned to look for her she was gone.

V

Midge was feeding her canary, humming a waltz-tune to herself the while : lazily lingering over the thrill that filtered through her, as she reminded herself how, since last night, she had fallen in love. . . .

"Don't," she exclaimed, with an affectation of pettishness, roused from her dream-land by the nip of the bird's beak. "What a bother you are, master impatience!" She scattered some hemp seeds over the floor of the cage : the plump little mass of yellow fluff hopped down, vigorously dipping his head.

. . . . He'd got such a nice face. . . . If she could just be friends with him keep him to herself out of the way of harm. . . . He looked so young she could become such friends with a boy like that real friends different, separate from the others. . . . He had made her feel so queer, uncomfortable, unhappy almost, last night : she couldn't help running away from him he might so easily have spoilt it all for her. . . . And she had lain awake in the dark, such a long while, dreaming about him. . . . Yes, she was quite in love with him. . . .

She moved to the window. The hoar-frost had

come, decking the trees in the square ; and the sky was white with the glare of the winter sun. How pretty everything looked in the clear morning light ! A man with a barrow-full of cabbages was moving slowly down the street, leading his donkey, all brown and furry, chanting as he went. She tried to catch the meaning of his cry. . . . A congregation of fat sparrows were taking their dust-bath and combing their wings in the roadway. One little fellow had lost his tail : he was so comical when he tried to fly.

She crumbled a biscuit on to the window-sill, and hid behind the curtain, peeping and waiting. But they refused to come ; they sat in a row on the railings, jerking their heads from side to side, as if by clockwork. She began to hum the waltz-tune over again.

. . . . Yes, something about that boy's face was sweet and gentle. . . . She'd never known any one quite like him. . . . She felt certain they would get along together. . . . How that tune kept running in her head ! . . .

She seated herself before the piano, and started to strum it.

* * * * *

Of a sudden, in the full, languorous swing of a phrase, the piano-lid crashed, rattling the whole room. She had caught his reflection in the mirror.

"My goodness !" she gasped, half swinging round on the stool. "How you did startle me !"

"I'm very sorry. . . . I didn't mean to." He stood blinking at her white cheeks.

"There, it's all right now. . . . It made me feel quite bad. . . . I never expected you'd come—so soon, I mean. . . . I was just thinking about you."

There was a red hat-mark across his forehead ; otherwise he was just the same as last night ; his open stare was unchanged.

"Had breakfast ?"

"Yes—at half-past eight."

"Oh ! I forgot—you've got a holiday to-day ?"

"It's Sunday."

"So it is !" she cried, her face rippling. "Fancy my not knowing that. How dreadful !" Then, ruefully examining her skirt—"And I'm not fit to be seen."

"But you are, really—you're lovely," he blurted out hastily, combating in all seriousness her depreciation of herself. "I think you're even prettier than last night."

She uttered a quick, nervous laugh.

Her unloosened hair was romping in rich folds over her shoulders ; a white flannel dressing-gown clung to her bust, while within the hollow of her falling sleeves he perceived her white arms. She reminded him of some school-picture of a Greek priestess. And his eyes went on devouring her.

"Please sit down. You look so uncomfortable. . . . 'I say, are you always solemn like this ? You don't know how glum you look. No wonder you startled me.'"

He coloured, and sat down opposite her stiffly.

"There, don't be vexed ; I didn't mean to laugh at you, Ronald. You see I've remembered your name."

His eyes were travelling round the room ; he was unaware how she was watching him.

"Is that your canary ?" he said at last.

"Come and look at him ; he's such a darling."

"Does he do any tricks ?" he asked, as they stood together by the cage.

"No—only bites—awfully hard sometimes."

She chirped to the bird, pursing her lips. He felt his heart thump ; his teeth began to chatter.

"How cold you are ! Go and warm yourself at the fire. . . . I say, I've got an idea. Do you know a game called Badminton ?"

"No ; what is it ?"

"Oh ! it's splendid fun. It's like lawn-tennis, only you play with battledores and shuttlecocks. . . . Here, just move these chairs out of the way. . . . Now the table. . . . Mind ! you'll spill the flowers. . . . Wait, I'll help you. . . . Now for the string. There it is on the piano. . . . Catch hold of the end—see, it wants knotting. . . . This nail 'll do. . . . Tie the other end on to the curtain hook—no, you silly boy, over there, opposite. . . . Now that anti-macassar. . . . Give us your handkerchief. Spread them out over the string. . . . That's beautiful. . . . Now for the battledores. They're on the top of the cupboard. . . . Get on the table. . . . Take care—you'll fall. . . . Put your hand on my

shoulder. . . . All right, it doesn't hurt. Lean on me. . . . Now then, you go the other side. . . . I'll begin. Ready! Play!"

Pang! pang! pang! pang! . . . the shuttlecock flew from one to the other. At last it struck the string, hesitated, and toppled over.

"Good stroke!" he cried enthusiastically. "What's that? Fifteen? How do you count?"

"That's nothing."

"No, no; of course it must count."

"Don't contradict. Play!"

The shuttlecock whizzed to and fro. Both were warming to the game. They were evenly matched, though she played with easy skill, and he with laborious clumsiness. Their countenances grew graver and graver, only intent on the flight of the feathers. For several minutes no comment passed between them, only, at the end of each bout, Ronald mechanically registered the score.

"Take that!" he called suddenly, loosing his energy awkwardly in a slash. But the shuttlecock shot under the string, and tumbled at her feet.

"Hurrah! Game to me!" And she clapped her battledore gleefully.

"Your service," he replied grimly. And, with a renewed volley of battledore blows, the battle raged again.

. . . . Deuce! . . . Vantage in! . . . Midge held the game, playing securely, while Ronald contorted his body to ungainly angles. He seemed on the point of missing every time.

All at once her battledore caught a picture-edge and the shuttlecock alighted on the floor.

"Damn that thing!" she broke out, vindictively staring in its face.

"Come," remonstrated Ronald from across the barrier. "You've another chance yet."

"Play!" she called excitedly. But she failed to reach the return volley. The game was his.

* * * * *

"Ugh! I *am* hot." She flung herself into an arm-chair. "Have a cigarette? There's some in that case on the mantelpiece."

He saw two letters, G. S., stamped on the leather inside. Why were they there? he wondered rapidly.

"Well, and me? Aren't you going to offer me one?"

"I beg your pardon."

"Perhaps you think it wrong to smoke?" she queried, roguishly turning her eyes up to him, the cigarette between her lips.

"No, I don't—not at all."

"Then give me a light."

* * * * *

"I say, you were awfully shy at first, weren't you?" She was pensively flicking the ash with her little finger.

"Yes," he acknowledged, colouring. "But I'm not a bit now," he added, smiling at her frankly.

"No, I see that," she retorted.

"Why did you disappear like that last night? Were you offended with me?"

She sat without answering, perplexedly watching the ascending streak of smoke. Presently she looked up, her expression clear.

"I'll tell you straight out all about it. The minute you spoke to me I liked your face awfully. You somehow seemed to me quite different from all the rest. . . . You looked so young and shy and bewildered. And then, I was afraid you'd say something—you wouldn't understand how it was I liked you. It was just an idea of mine. . . . When I got home I thought how jolly it would be if I were to be friends with you—proper friends, I mean. I wouldn't mind if I didn't see you very often; if only I just knew it was like that. I wouldn't bother you; I can look after myself all right." She stopped in anxious expectancy.

He felt himself suddenly overflowing with devotion to her; he longed desperately to be able to afford her some striking proof of his gratitude. And the novel sense of important responsibility towards her swelled his exultation.

"I will be your friend always," he answered simply.

"Perhaps I seem to you ridiculous, talking like this when I have only seen you once before. But I'm like that. I always do things just as they come. It's my way—I can't help it. If I could, perhaps things would have been quite different. Now you know exactly what I am, don't you?"

He flushed crimson: his whole being rose in revolt against the brutal thought she forced upon him. His troubled glance appealed to her, but she did not seem to notice. The moment of silence that followed quickened the whirl of his perplexity.

"Yes," he blurted out, with a supreme effort. "But that doesn't matter. . . . It doesn't make any difference. . . . It isn't your fault, I mean. . . . You aren't any the worse. . . . I respect you just the same. . . ." Hot shame hustled the words helter-skelter to his lips.

"You're a dear good boy to say that. But you're wrong. I don't mind telling you that. I've got no one to blame but myself. . . . Promise me you'll come and see me again. . . . Promise."

"I promise," he said solemnly, "to do whatever you ask me."

As he ceased speaking, she laughed a little excitedly. Then jumping up, with a sudden lightness of tone—

"My goodness! I *am* hungry. Aren't you?"

"Yes, I am, rather."

"Well now, tell me, what would you like for lunch?"

He hesitated.

"I'm most awfully sorry—the fact is, I ought to go home. My sister-in-law asked a friend of mine to lunch. But I'll come back as soon as I can."

"No, you mustn't do that."

"I'll stay then. After all, it doesn't matter."

She shook her head.

He felt pride in obeying.

"May I come to see you to-morrow?—in the morning?"

"No ; you must go to your work."

"But I must see you," he objected impetuously.

"Well, if you *must* then," she answered, laughing ; "would you like to take me out to dinner?"

"Most awfully. To-morrow?"

"Yes ; come to fetch me at half-past seven. Now good-bye, or you'll be late for your friend."

He took her outstretched hand. She looked for a moment straight into his eyes, and then he moved away.

"Good-bye, till to-morrow—at half-past seven," he forced himself to say.

"Good-bye," she repeated quietly.

VI

Faster and faster he walked, struggling to cheat the longing to return to her. The keen air flicked his cheeks, and the crisp, whitened turf of the Park crackled under his tread. Behind the frail tracery of the twigs, peeping between the gaunt arms of the black-skinned trees, dancing over the ripples that shimmered silver across the lake, he beheld her sparkling smile. . . .

. . . . He was her friend her friend. . . . The word coursed exultantly through him, echoing and re-echoing. The scene lived again ; he saw her rippling rivulets of hair ; he felt the quick play of her gaze ; he heard the ring of her laughter ; her voice spoke to him : he replied to her ; once more, in a corner of that disordered room, their bond was sealed. . . .

She stood, a white and dazzling figure, blocking the centre of his imagination ; exquisite, wonderful, yet having accorded him the intoxicating privilege of familiarity.

He pictured himself by her side, intimate, confidential, grateful, reckless in devotion ; or strong, protective, necessary ; or again, before the world, masking the bond in proud unobtrusiveness, and so always, on, on, into the misty future. . . .

Only he and she remained in the world—alone, and together the rest faded to thin silhouettes. Helen slipped to the fringe of his life. The luncheon towards which he was walking became unreal, like a stage-scene, in which a part had been set for him. The time till to-morrow evening was as a stretch of colourless waste.

Then, under his care, how beautiful she would look! . . . Her tiny, white-gloved hands, and the gold bangles encircling her wrists! And all during dinner, while, with the waiters moving behind, they discussed trivial topics, he would know that she had secretly chosen him—set him apart. His blood quickened with excited anticipation. . . .

Ignorance simplified his whole prospect: blind jealousy of the male, unpricked by the goad of sexual vision, drowsed on; the welling-up of unsullied chivalry held him to the exact letter of her appeal. Eagerly he exchanged the crude name she had driven him to give her for another of gentler import, and that he accepted readily, slurring its significance. His faith in his own exaltation was spontaneous, unquestioning.

And he seemed to see the past months mapped out behind him, hollow, empty of purpose, filled by a senseless accumulation of poor trivialities. Across the newly-kindled glow, he caught flittings of vague possibilities, hints of a life permeated by sound, exhilarating goodness. He remembered, with a twinge of repentant shame, certain tacit acquiescences in obscene college conversations:

henceforward he felt himself ennobled, lifted above the common ruck. . . .

Stout, over-clothed ladies, coming from church, passed him ; men in smooth-fitting, tight-buttoned coats, carrying along with them a torpid, Sunday air ; children trotting gravely, as if oppressed by stiff garments ; the streets bare ; the houses asleep ; the shops barred up and lifeless : from sheer frolic of heart he fell to noting the quaint physiognomy of the London Sabbath.

VII

She was in black ; a sleeveless dress, just betraying her breasts, banded at the waist with vivid crimson. Her smooth hair hung low over her nape, as was the fashion, in a dark, heavy coil ; and the simplicity of her bare arms and neck was unspoiled by ornament.

And he—she was proud of him in evening attire, straight and lithe and correctly spotless ; his hair brushed in a clean sweep back from his forehead, and drifting, above the ears, into crisp curls.

He took command of her at once ; authoritatively deciding the place of the dinner, insisting that she was well wrapped at the throat. And to his deferential protection she abandoned herself with delight.

They sped lightly away, the bell on the horse's neck tinkling shrilly, past dark houses and blazing shops.

"It's freezing, I believe," he remarked. "Glass down," he shouted up through the trap.

The window descended slowly : she nestled almost imperceptibly against his shoulder : he was adorable, she told herself.

At the restaurant, she found a room reserved, and a dinner ordered. And, as he relieved her of

her cloak and lace wrapper, she became conscious that he had none of that indefinable air of obtrusive proprietorship, adopted on like occasions by other men. For a while she made pretence of chatting carelessly ; but his attitude towards her, continuing gravely, a little elaborately, respectful, swelled her gratitude, choked her spirits, and swathed her happiness in sentimental melancholy.

A dreamy mood crept over her irresistibly, evoking blurred glimpses of past scenes : she forgot him, feeling herself curiously alone and isolated. No bitterness flavoured her musings ; only fleeting, half-formulated wonderings : no rankling remembrance of male cruelty ; no savagely revolting realization of the part she played. She had found men pleasant, affectionate, generous.

So she recalled each one, without rancour : and of one she thought almost tenderly, for he was now dead. Yet when, awakening, she looked across at Ronald, her eyes grew hot, and her sight misty. She felt the rising of a passionate longing to cry—from no grief, for no reason. Clenching her lips she fought with the hungering for tears, struggling to hear his words, to see her plate clearly.

He had noticed her untouched food, her inconsequent replies, the tight lines of her mouth ; and the end of the dinner seemed to him interminable.

“What is it, Midge ? Are you feeling bad ?” he asked quickly, as the door closed behind the obsequious waiter.

“No, of course not. It’s nothing.”

But the next moment she was sobbing with her head on the table. . . .

. . . . She felt the firm clasp of his hands round her head, trying to raise it; and between the throbs of her weeping she heard him saying—

“ Don’t don’t cry. . . . What is it? Can’t I do anything? . . . ”

But she let the tears flow on unchecked: they brought her warm relief. . . . Presently his hands were on her head again: she submitted. And when he had gently lifted the face, a smile was gleaming through her tears, like the sparkle of sunshine across a fleeting shower.

“ Aren’t I a silly? ”

“ But what were you crying for? ”

“ I don’t know. It came quite suddenly.” She laid her hand on his. “ You’re a good, kind boy. I’m not often like that.”

He remembered quickly how Helen had once spoken to him in that tone; and he felt a great compassion for the frailty of women welling up within him.

“ Sit down now and finish your coffee,” she continued.

He obeyed.

“ I don’t remember ever having cried all about nothing before.”

She took a banana, and began to peel it slowly; and he carried his chair round the table and sat down by her side, slipping her bare arm under his own.

"Dear Midge! It's all right now, isn't it?"

She nodded, munching the fruit, and turned to him with a smile of affectionate happiness.

"Come, have the other half." And she held the end for him to bite.

"We'll often have dinner here, I vote. It's a jolly little place," he said, caressing her hand.

"Isn't it rather ruinous?"

He named the price.

"But you don't know, I've three hundred a year of my own."

"What a fortune! All your very own, do you mean?"

"Yes; my mother left it to me. I came into it when I was twenty-one."

"You're not twenty-one. Don't talk such absurd nonsense."

"Yes, I am—twenty-two. And you, how old are you?"

"Guess."

"Twenty?"

"No—more."

"Twenty-one?"

"More."

"Twenty-two?"

She assented.

"Fancy our being the same age. When's your birthday?"

"The fourteenth of March."

"And mine's on the tenth."

"By Jove! You're just four days older then."

"Split another banana with me."

"No, I couldn't really."

"Do as you're told. Obey your elders, sir."

"Very good, madam," he retorted in mock meekness.

* * * * *

"What would you like to do now?" he began.

"Nothing. Let's just stay here and talk."

"You wouldn't like to go to the Gaiety? I've taken a box."

"How extravagant!"

"You've forgotten the fortune. Why, except to-night, I don't believe I've spent two pounds during the last three weeks. I'm positively saving."

"How shocking! But about that box—it's awfully wasteful. I suppose we ought to go for a little."

"No, not if you'd rather not. Remember, it'll cost a shilling to get there."

"If it comes to that, I don't mind standing the cab." And they laughed together.

* * * * *

"I say, Ronald, I want to ask you something. Promise to answer truthfully. . . . Well, have you ever been in love?"

"No."

"Never at all?"

"Never at all."

"Haven't you ever kissed any one?"

He shook his head.

"But you must have."

"No, I swear I haven't."

"I wish I was like that," she remarked in a more sober tone.

"Have you?—been in love, I mean . . . often?" he asked, fingering her hand nervously to hide his embarrassment.

She nodded with gravity. "Yes, lots of times. But never seriously," she continued reflectively. "Just sort of short likings. Men are always awfully good to me."

He saw her lips part in a faint smile, and winced, his pity stung to incoherent sputterings by a sudden recollection of the brutal name men gave to her calling. Unconsciously he let her hand drop. . . . What had gone before? . . . what was her tale? . . . Those others—who were good to her—what were they like? He drove in wild parade a flock of male faces. . . . They had all known her before he had. . . . They knew her now—she and they had common memories. . . . They had made love to her—kissed—yes, of course, kissed her—those soft, cool arms. . . . He was the last—he was behind them all. . . . But no, protested his vanity, he was different—she had said so . . . it must be that he was different. . . . Feverishly he climbed to the pinnacle of his former exaltation, giddily forcing himself to vision her by his side, her white-gloved hands clasping his shoulders, while he shielded her from the yelping pack of other men. . . . Then he dropped back into the turmoil of perplexity. . . .

He waited in suspense for her to tell him more, yet he shrank from questioning her. When, however, she spoke again, he at once perceived that the drift of her thoughts had altogether changed. And he could not but acquiesce.

"Tell me what you do every day. You go to your tutor's in the morning?"

He described the place to her. She asked him about his evenings.

"I sit and talk to my sister-in-law, when I've no work."

She plied him with an abundance of questions concerning Helen, listening to his replies attentively, encouraging him to hear himself talk. Thus the edge of his curiosity concerning her was, for the moment, dulled.

He again mentioned the empty box at the theatre. She declined, and declared with abrupt decision that she must start for home. He remonstrated, but she retorted firmly, and quickly grew impatient at his persistence, forbidding him to escort her. He continued to repeat his remonstrance; her tone became brusquely imperious. They descended to the street in silence. She entered a hansom and said something to him, which he failed to hear, as the horse swung round. A flock of cabs, whirling down Oxford Street, engulfed her.

Hardly realizing that she was gone, he was left standing on the pavement. The first thing that he remembered was that he had never kissed her. . .

VIII

Ronald sat amidst the closely-packed figures that blackened an omnibus roof, his thoughts spinning aimlessly, like the fitful columns of dust lifted at street corners by a gusty breeze.

* * * * *

The conductor demanding his fare, rousing him from his musings, snapped the train of his thought. Fumbling in his pocket for the coppers, all at once he remembered her. . . .

"She'll git no verdict."

"Not she. Why, 'ee's bin bled for years."

"Well, serve 'im right. 'Ees a bad 'un any'ow. The aristocracy's all rotten nowadays. I say it's because they ain't got to earn their own bread. Them young toffs wouldn't be so free with their cash if they 'ad to sweat for it."

"An' quite right of the women to bleed 'em. Let 'em get all they can, I say. They're druv to it, poor things. Why, I tell you they're worth a damned side more, most of 'em, than them as calls 'emselfes gentlemen jest because they wears top 'ats. I'm a regular Socialist, I am. Every man earn his own bread, I say."

Ronald listened with vague curiosity, while before the vision of tangled brown locks, and

the soft white dress clinging at the bust, and trimmed with gold braid round the sleeves, the resolve all slipped from his mind.

. . . . They were right, those men, in their rough fashion, he thought. They looked labourers of some kind, with battered hats and rugged, unfinished sort of faces. . . . It was women like Midge they meant, women trodden down, women driven to it. . . . He likened her to a beautiful flower cast to the routlings of swine. . . . And the stirrings of pity sent proud exhilaration bubbling up boisterously within him: his own attitude towards her stood out in clear, luminous contrast. . . .

. . . . The frost still held. . . . A team of heavy horses, straining at a waggon-load of casks, staggered by, banging their hoofs on the pavement, while the driver, all muffled in sacks, high up on his perch, cracked his whip with sharp reports over their backs. . . . A greyish haze daintily blurred the clustering swarm of vehicles, creeping like flies up the hill towards the narrow end of the straight, broad street; and the sun, topping a bank of creamy clouds, set bright specks twinkling on the harness of cabs, and the window-panes ablaze with gold. . . .

. . . . The omnibus, turning the corner, rumbled down Regent Street. Each jolt carried him further from Thurgate Road. But he did not descend, judging it was yet too early, dallying with his impatience by means of a series of hurried calculations of time, watching the clocks, and, as the face

of each one varied, computing afresh how long it would take him to reach her from the different points on the route. When the omnibus halted at the Circus he got down, intending to saunter back the way he had come: soon, however, he was unconsciously walking as fast as his legs could carry him. . . .

An old woman, whom he had seen on his first visit, was kneeling on the doorstep, some rags and a zinc bucket beside her. The door stood ajar.

"She's away," she called, as he came up.

"Away—out of London, do you mean?"

"Yes, I believe so." And she started to scrub noisily.

"Where's she gone?" he asked blankly.

The grating sound ceased.

"Dunno, I'm sure. Wait a minute. I'll ask Mrs. Wraggleston. She'll know."

She disappeared down the passage, and presently returned, followed by a younger woman, whom he guessed to be the landlady.

"Miss Bashford's gone to the country, sir," she began civilly.

"Where?" he asked again.

"I'm sure I can't tell you, sir, for certain—Brighton, I expect."

"You don't know her address?"

"No, sir, I don't."

"Or when she'll be back?"

"It's sure to be in a day or two."

"Thanks." He moved to go.

"Do you wish to leave any message?"

"No; good-morning," he heard himself answering.

A little way down the street he turned to glance at the house. The two women still stood on the doorstep, looking after him, and talking to one another.

* * * * *

He returned disconsolately to the crammer's, and for two hours scribbled mechanically in his note-books. As the minutes slipped by, his longing to see her, to be with her, strengthened in aching intensity. . . . Everything seemed cheerless, dreary. . . . Why had she gone? . . . When would she be back? . . . in a day or two . . . tomorrow? . . . or the next day? . . . He might catch a train down to Brighton . . . but her address? . . . Still he might meet her in some street, on the Parade. . . . What was the reason for her going? . . . Was she alone? . . . Who was she with?

The class-room was darkening. Some one lit the gas. Outside he saw snowflakes in the air.

At two o'clock he went out to lunch with the others, Harbord, Willson, and Dawkins. They talked of a new burlesque, and retailed some of the jokes. He sat staring gloomily into the street.

It had stopped snowing, but the fog had descended. The gas-lamps were burning, dismally speckling the monotony of the mud-coloured atmosphere, like sickly remains of an unfinished orgy. Some lighted windows opposite cast squares

of murky red : a sense of silence and of desolation prevailed, as if some curse had fallen upon the town.

“What’s the matter, Thornycroft? In the blues, eh?”

“Given you the chuck, has she? Cheer up, old chap. There are as good fish in the sea as ever came out of it.”

The allusion rudely roused him : he blurted out an oath concerning the weather to cover his confusion.

* * * * *

And the hours of the afternoon loomed ahead of him, long and yellow. . . .

IX

It was a Saturday. In the class-room the hours dragged by sluggishly ; he tingled with impatience, and his eyes travelled constantly to the clock. At last it was over. The men rose, clattering their note-books. Harbord and Willson were planning to spend the afternoon at some music-hall. Ronald shook them off curtly, hailed a cab, and started for Thurgate Road.

The horse lolloped in a senseless sort of canter, rattling the trace-chains and the glass overhead. The streets were crowded ; at every instant, it seemed, omnibuses blocked the way. Near the top of Regent Street a policeman stopped the traffic while a string of stout ladies crossed the road. He sat drumming his fingers on the door, convincing himself that she was back, and feverishly anticipating the first moment of meeting. In Portland Place he shouted to the driver ; and a heavy lashing roused the horse into a caricature of a gallop.

From the doorstep he vacantly observed some ragged children dancing to the tune of a piano-organ before a public-house at the corner. Then the door opened.

"She's jest come back," said the old woman.

He pushed past her, and stepping over a bundle of rugs, brown-paper parcels, and portmanteaus strewn across the passage, ran up, taking two stairs at a time.

The room was unchanged. There she was kneeling on the hearthrug, holding an open newspaper against the grate, in a brown dress, a dark hat and veil; wearing a stiff collar like a man's with a red sailor's knot beneath. She half turned her head.

"Hulloa! it's you. How did you know I was back? I was just wondering when I should see you."

He came close to her, a glow of warm happiness rising within him. The red tie made her cheeks look quite rosy.

"Let me help," he said, kneeling beside her.

"Thanks. Hold that corner tight or it'll catch fire."

Presently he said simply—

"It is jolly to see you again."

She smiled at him, her face lit up with pleasure.

"I've been awfully lonely without you."

"What nonsense you talk, you silly boy!"

"But I have, really. I came up here every day to try to find out when you'd be back."

"I don't believe you did," she exclaimed quickly.

"Yes, I promise you."

She was leaning on her elbow, one arm still keeping the newspaper in its place. Her disengaged hand slowly found its way across the

hearthrug to his. At the soft, gloved pressure, his gaze turned slowly to hers.

"Dear little Midge——"

But springing up of a sudden, and dragging back the paper, she cut him short.

"I thought it was alight. There, that'll burn, I think. . . . Now, sit down and talk to me."

She sank into an arm-chair ; he remained kneeling on the hearthrug.

"Tell me," he said, "about Brighton. Why did you go?"

"But I want to hear all about you first. What have you been doing?"

"Nothing. . . . Going to my work just as usual. . . ."

"Tell me, why did you go to Brighton?" he asked suddenly.

"I love the sea. It was beautiful weather—quite warm and sunny. I suppose it was like that in town. We sat on the Parade——"

"You and some one else?"

"You don't know him," she said shortly.

"Do you like him very much?" he asked.

She nodded.

"What a curious boy you are! What funny questions you do ask! . . . I say, take me out to lunch, will you?"

"Of course. Where shall we go?"

She named a restaurant in Great Portland Street. Then—

"Wait a minute while I get an umbrella."

They walked together through the streets, dry and clean with the frost. Men stared at her as she passed, and when he noticed this he felt very proud.

Once during luncheon he reverted hesitatingly to Brighton.

"Don't keep on bothering about that," she retorted, almost crossly.

* * * * *

Afterwards they went back to Thurgate Road. She wanted, she said, to show him her two new dresses.

Sitting on the floor, she opened the big cardboard boxes, unfolded the tissue-paper with which they seemed filled, and spread the silks on the sofa.

"This, you see," she began, fingering a soft mass of pale pink, "is an evening one. Princess with a Watteau back. Do you like that?" She stopped, rippling with laughter.

"Don't look so horribly puzzled! . . . You poor boy, you don't understand a bit, now do you?"

"No, I don't much," he admitted ruefully. "But explain."

She declined, still shaking with mirth.

"But you think them nice all the same?"

"Lovely."

Then she ran out, and returned with a box of chocolate creams. He took one, and they stood close together with the box between them.

"Midge," he began, "will you tell me a little about yourself?"

"About myself. . . . There's nothing to tell."

"Why did you go down to Brighton with that man?"

"What a bother you are!"

"But why did you go?" he reiterated obstinately.

"I suppose I can go where I like, can't I? I needn't ask your leave first. Since you're dead keen on knowing—well, I went because I was hard up.—There!"

She caught a little at her breath, and her face was flaming.

"Now are you satisfied?" she concluded bitterly.

"But why didn't you tell me? . . . I would have given you as much money as you wanted."

He spoke very quietly.

"I don't want your money. . . . I wouldn't take it."

Her voice trembled; he thought she was going to cry. Looking down, however, her eyes fell on the chocolate-box, and she laughed again through her tears. Then her face clouded again; she recoiled quickly, as he tried to put his arm round her.

"But, Midge dear Midge——"

"Don't," she muttered, as if in sudden pain.

"Don't spoil things. How stupid you are! Can't you understand a bit?"

Behind the houses opposite the sun was sinking sullenly, against a cold, opaque-grey sky, spattered

with black fragments of cloud. It seemed as if the twilight had come all at once.

"Come, Ron," she said gently, "don't let's squabble. Come and sit by the fire. I want to tell you some things."

He sat astride of the arm of her chair, his hand caressing her hair. After waiting a moment for her to speak, he said—

"Midge, I didn't know, I didn't understand till just now. I've never cared for any one before. I've hardly stopped thinking about you since the first time I saw you." The words came out clumsily; the last phrase, as soon as he had spoken it, he remembered having read in some novel.

She took his hand in hers silently.

"Midge, will you let me love you? I love you better than everything else in the world. Somehow I've got to understand things a lot better just lately. It's no good my going into the army. We'll get married and go away to the colonies."

She lifted his hand to her lips. The next moment his arms were around her; he was passionately kissing her neck.

"Say you love me back a little," he whispered.

"Yes, dear, dear boy. I've never been so happy before."

"And we'll belong to each other for always?"

With a quick excited laugh she answered—

"I'm married, you know."

"Married!"

"I ran away from him," she continued. "He was a brute. He beat me."

"What's his name?"

"Keith. He's an actor."

"But can't you get a divorce?"

"He could. But he's gone to America. That's why I ran away from him. I was afraid to go with him."

"How long ago was it?"

"Nearly a year. I was only married to him six weeks. A friend of his—Ethel Stainer, a sort of actress—helped me to get away. He suspected it, I've always thought. He wouldn't let me out of his sight. It was the evening before the ship sailed that I escaped."

"Won't he come back?"

"I don't know."

"Haven't you heard anything of him?"

"No, nothing. Ethel Stainer said she would try to find out about him for me, but I didn't want her to. You mustn't be jealous of the others. They've been downright good friends to me."

So they sat on in the growing darkness, and she told him the whole story of her life. And it seemed to him horribly, infinitely pathetic, so that when she had finished he felt that he was bound to her irrevocably, whatever might happen.

"Well, that's about the lot," she exclaimed after a pause, with an abrupt hardening of tone. "What do you think of me?"

"I love you just the same, more than ever."

Poor Midge, I am so sorry. But I'll make you happier in the future."

"But I'm not down on my luck at all. He made me feel very miserable—lots of things which you wouldn't understand. But I've been quite happy since."

"Midge."

"Don't call me that name. Every one calls me that. My proper name is Nita. Now promise you'll give up all those mad ideas. I'm all right; don't you get excited about me. Promise me you'll go on working very hard. The army's your profession. How funny it seems to me talking to you like this."

"But——"

"Now, no buts. Remember you're only a boy: I'm a full-grown woman."

"Won't you let me speak?"

"I'll not let you say anything—at least not now. Good-bye." There was a note of command in her voice; he felt he must obey.

"Mayn't I see you to-morrow?"

"Yes, dear," she answered gently. "Come in the afternoon. I'll buy a cake and get them to make some tea. That'll be great fun, won't it? And now, I'm going to send you home. Your people 'll be wondering what's become of you."

With a new joy in doing exactly as she bid him he took her hand—then went.

X

Beneath a clear sun the frost had melted ; and of a sudden, as it were, the days grew glittering and altogether warm. It was with a subtle, indefinable gladness that Midge anticipated the coming of spring, and there were moments when, at the sight of the light glancing prettily in the street, she would smile faintly to herself, for no reason, from sheer sunniness of heart.

She saw scarcely any one but Ronald now ; and every day he appeared at odd, unexpected moments. She liked that it should be so, for then each day the thrill of expectancy was renewed. She took to dressing early in the hope that he would look in for ten minutes in the morning on his way to work ; she waited for him at tea-time, or later, in case he should come to take her out to dinner. She found a childish delight in awaiting him ; living entirely in the present, she thoughtlessly accepted the chastity of their relations as irrevocable. Thus her sentiment for him floated on from day to day in heedless security, and sometimes she mused indolently concerning the past, wondering whether certain memories had not after all been left her by dreams.

One afternoon they went together by train into the country. They wandered from the station into

a beech-wood near the line, and sat down on the clean slab left by a freshly-felled tree. After the roar of London—the thronged streets, the rush of cabs, the rattle of vans and omnibuses—the stillness of the beech-wood pervaded her intimately. She forgot Ronald, who lay smoking a cigarette beside her; she felt she would be content to remain there for hours and hours, doing nothing, thinking of nothing, remembering nothing. The sparkling floor, all speckled by the sunlight, was thickly carpeted with brown leaves, one of which, every now and again, would rise to flutter uneasily at her feet. Here and there a bush, decked in infant greenery, shamed the rest, still shivering in the dead garb of winter. Huge trees lifted like pillars their smooth, green trunks; and beyond, through a crowd of straight, slim stems, she could discern the steely gleam of a river, banding the meadows.

Ronald's smoke blew in her face: she shifted her position.

The swelling undulations of the earth, coated in a great patchwork of grey and brown and rank green, carried a crest of ruddy wood, broken at last by a bunch of fruit trees, powdered from head to foot with snow-white blossom. Faint cries—whether of birds or of men she could not tell—wandered up from the distance. . . .

* * * * *

And when they were back in London, a dull sadness crept over her—a dissatisfaction, a dislike of the sight of streets, and a vague longing for home. . . .

XI

A treacherous, unmanageable wind, screaming as it rushed past, filled the night. The rain fled before it, helter-skelter ; and ragged glimmers of gold danced across the wet pavement. The vague mass of a group of people darkened the steps before the entrance-hall of the Star and Garter ; by the road-edge a double phaeton, the horses plunging between the bars of light from the carriage lamps.

A crash ! then a shout.

"Woa ! yer damned fool—stand steady, will yer. Here, a light—he's caught the splinter-bar."

A lantern moved out of the crowd, illuminating the horses' flanks.

"Steady, boy, steady. He's just nicked hi'self. The bar's right enough." And the man tested it vigorously.

"Tell the gentleman to 'urry up," called the ostler. "The 'orses is jest pullin' my arms off."

At that moment the doorway swung open and Ronald appeared. The hard, white electric light struck his face, as he leisurely buttoned his gloves, his hat aslant on his head.

"It's raining, isn't it?" said Midge, coming up behind him.

"Yes, beastly night."

"Mr. Thornycroft, sir," cried a waiter, running up the steps towards them, and speaking excitedly. "Be advised, sir. Don't try to take them horses back to London to-night. It ain't safe: it ain't indeed, sir."

Ronald threw a quick glance at the people on the steps.

"Here, get me a cigar—a large Habana," he answered, raising his voice.

"Can't you persuade him, miss? The ostler says he knows you can't get home to-night. They ain't fit to be in harness, them animals."

A boy in buttons brought some cigars on a plate.

"Have a hansom, Midge?" said Ronald, laconically, as he chose one.

"Come, be quick," she retorted sharply.

They descended the steps, and the people moved aside to let them pass.

"They'll smash up before they're through the town," said a voice.

"It's madness—and the girl too."

"She's no business to go. Can't some one stop her?"

Ronald had swung himself on to the box.

Midge turned to the crowd.

"Well, won't any of you help me up?"

Half-a-dozen figures started forward: in an instant she was strapping the apron round her.

"Why doesn't some one stop them?" repeated a voice.

"There's a spare seat behind, if the gentleman's in a hurry to be home," Midge called back.

"Let 'em go," shouted Ronald.

The off horse plunged again, struggling to rear. Ronald let the reins drop loose, and cut him heavily with the whip. The animal banged against the collar, and the pair broke into a gallop down the hill.

Ronald rammed the brake home, and they steadied a bit when they reached the bottom.

"You're quite sober?" asked Midge, as they clattered through the town.

"It'll be all right when we get outside."

"I say, chuck away that cigar."

"Catch hold of it, will you?"

He lowered his head, and she took it from between his teeth. It hit the road with a shower of sparks.

"Mind the 'bus. It's going to start—I heard the bell. Keep outside, for God's sake."

He twisted the rein round his wrist by the buckle, and with a steady wrench from the shoulder hauled the horses on to their haunches. Her grip was on his arm—so tight that he almost cried out.

Then they swung round the corner.

Midge clutched her hat: the wind caught them.

"This is lovely," she broke out.

Ronald did not answer. The near horse was trying to stop, frightened at something black by the roadside. With a rush he sprang past it,

banging his belly against the pole, and away they whirled down the colonnade of lamp posts.

"What did you say?" he asked.

"I think this is splendid—dashing through the night, with the wind and the rain. I shouldn't mind a scrap if we were to smash up. I'd rather like to be killed with you, Ron," she laughed nervously.

"The fool's been and put them on the cheek."

Still galloping, they shot past a jogging pony-cart.

"You do drive splendidly," she exclaimed presently.

They were on Barnes Common.

As they neared the railway-bridge, he slackened the reins, and the phaeton rocked more heavily, as they mounted the hill at top speed.

"The bay's getting done."

Down past the silent rows of square villas, they rattled over the river into London, the horses shaking the whole bridge with their stamping. The streets swarmed with a crowd of umbrellas, which overflowed on either side into the roadway.

"Lucky it's Sunday. Bother these 'busses."

"Ronald."

"Well?"

"Does any one—does your sister-in-law know—suspect—me?"

"That I took you out to dinner? No."

"I don't mean that, but—oh! mind that child."

He shouted, and the child scuttled back.

"That we love each other, I mean?"

"I don't see what it's got to do with any one."

"Ron——"

"Yes."

"What do you think they'll do when they find out? They must find out soon—your relations, I mean."

"You *are* a funny child, Midge. What on earth are you driving at?"

"Because I'd hate for them to know about me and to come between us, that's all."

He noticed the hardness of her tone, and, embarrassed, flicked the whip to and fro.

* * * * *

"This will do. Stop, please. I'll take a hansom from here."

Mechanically he pulled the horses to a standstill. Almost before he had turned to give her his hand, she was in the roadway.

"Good-bye, Ron," and she stepped into a passing hansom.

Absently, for a while, he followed the red specks of the cab-lamps.

Piccadilly looked dark and dreary; across St. James's Park, he could see the pattern of some lighted windows high up against the sky. How tall those houses were, he thought, as he turned down a side street towards the stables. A sudden jolt brought him to his senses: he had driven over the kerb.

XII

The next night saw the end of it—an end, sudden and unexpected as the beginning had been. He had not seen her all day, and in the evening he had been dining out. It was dark in the hall, when he let himself in: the servants had gone to bed. He lit a candle, the match striking noisily in the stillness of the house. An envelope, addressed to him, lay on the table, and he went into the dining-room to read it.

“DEAR RONALD,

“I *did* enjoy it so yesterday. It *was* jolly, the dark night, and the galloping horses, and the rain blowing in one's face. After I got home I stayed a long while thinking about it all, and sort of mooning about you and everything. And I don't know why, but I began to feel quite old and sensible, and all my silly feather-brainedness went away. It was awfully strange and queer, Ronald, and I don't believe you'll understand a bit. It came to me quite suddenly that it could never go on like that. It couldn't really. It was too nice and jolly. Something would have happened. I feel quite sure of it. So, as I said, quite suddenly I made up my mind to go back

home. I'd been meaning to do so for a long while. Do you remember I told you I was going that first time you spoke to me? I can't explain why I made up my mind suddenly like that—and perhaps you'll think me quite heartless. I should be very sorry for you to think of me like that. But I can't help it if you do, because I am quite *certain* I'm doing what's best. As I have said, I've been intending to go for a long while, and if I hadn't met you I should have gone before this. No one down there knows anything about what I've been doing in London, and father's getting very old, and he's all alone now. I shall live with him, and become very good and steady.

“Now I want you, dear Ronald—you've been very, very good to me—I want you to promise me one thing. *Never, never to try to find out where I've gone, and never to come down after me.* You will promise me this, won't you, Ronald, for the sake of all the jolly times we've had together? Yes, I know you will, and I shall trust you.

“So now I shall say good-bye, and wish you all good luck. You've been a dear, dear, good, true friend to me, and I shall never, never forget you. Good-bye, once again.

“NITA.”

The fire was dead; only cold cinders lay in the grate. But he did not notice the chilliness of the room, but for a long while remained there,

staring stupidly at the letter, as he was, in his hat, overcoat, and gloves. The door stood ajar, and the almond-shaped flame of the candle, orange-coloured at the tip, flickered fitfully in the draught. . . . A clock sounded a single timid note. He started, crumpled the letter in his pocket, and went briskly up-stairs, as if he had come to some satisfactory decision.

A streak of light lay under Helen's door : as he crossed the landing, it opened.

"Come in a moment, Ron," said her voice. "I haven't seen you since the morning. Did you have a pleasant evening?"

He had never before seen the inside of her room. The dainty refinement of each intimate detail struck him. How orderly everything was! The glistening, silver-backed brushes, ranged on the toilet-table; the white-panelled wardrobes, their edges picked out in gold; the bright-blue bed-curtains; the warm, terra-cotta walls. A fire was cosily blazing, throwing a vague dance of shadows across the ceiling. And she looked white and fragile, in a loose dress that seemed all lace. Irresistibly, he compared her in his mind to Midge. How curiously different they were! . . .

"What's the matter?" she asked in a startled voice.

"Nothing's the matter," he answered shortly.

"But there is. . . . I can see it in your face. I can see you've got something on your mind."

"No, I'm all right. Don't you worry about me."

"What is it?" she persisted. "Is it the examination? Don't you think you'll get through?"

He made an impatient sign of dissent.

"Ron, don't shut yourself up from me. Tell me your difficulties. . . . Let me help you. . . . I'm sure I could, whatever they are. . . . Much more than you think."

The strained note of her pleading startled him. How excited she was all of a sudden! She stood waiting for him to speak. He wished she would sit down, and not gaze at him like that. He felt goaded to say something.

"I think I shall give up the idea of the army," he muttered half to himself.

"Give it up! . . . Give it up! . . . Why?" she asked in blank astonishment.

"The army's rot nowadays. I can't get into a really good regiment as it is, and I should be only cooped up in some poky country town."

"But you used to be so enthusiastic about it all."

"No, I only fancied I was. . . . I shall go out to the colonies—to New Zealand, or somewhere. . . ."

"Ronald!"

There was a silence. The gasp of her exclamation seemed to linger in the air.

"Since when have you had these ideas?"

"Just lately."

"And you really mean them?"

"Yes."

There was another pause. He got up and stood by the mantelpiece, fidgeting with some china ornaments, apprehensively tempted to tell her. . . . He must tell somebody. . . . And led by her question, and his reply to it, to believe in the firmness of his decision to sacrifice his career in order to marry her, he was nervously proud of its importance.

"But I don't understand. . . . What has made you change like this?"

He continued to fidget with the ornaments.

"There must be some reason. . . . Why won't you trust me? Don't keep me in the dark like this. . . . It isn't right of you. . . . It's unkind. . . . Don't you trust me?" she repeated, catching a glimpse of his irresolution. "Tell me what's made you change?"

"Nothing. . . . Nothing's made me change."

Her features stiffened slowly, and he felt angrily uncomfortable because he could not help paining her. He turned a little vase round and round in the palm of his hand. The silence was becoming intolerable.

At last he spoke, ostentatiously replacing the vase, and forcing himself to simulate indifference.

"By Jove! it's half-past twelve. I must be going to bed. Good-night. . . . Good-night, Helen."

"Good-night," she answered mechanically.

He had reached the door, but there the impulse to speak gently to her fought for release.

"Helen—" he began.

"Good-night," she repeated dully as before.

She sat listening to his footsteps ascending the stairs. His door closed, and she heard his tread overhead. After a while, all sound ceased. . . .

XIII

Twelve years later, on his return from India, he met Midge again.

It was a frosty October evening in a stable-yard at Huntingdon. He was on his way to a country house in the neighbourhood, and had come to hire a horse and trap. Her husband kept the yard, and she was the mother of three chubby-cheeked girls. It was late : the men had all gone to bed, so she held the lantern, while her husband harnessed the mare.

She knew him at once ; but because of her husband, refrained from betraying it. And he just glanced carelessly at her and never recognized her.

Then he climbed up beside her husband, and the trap rattled out of the yard.

IN CUMBERLAND

A PHANTOM regiment of giant mist-pillars swept silently across the valley; beaded drops loaded each tuft of coarse, dull-tinted grass; the peat-hags gaped like black, dripping flesh-wounds in the earth's side; the distance suggested rectangular fields and wooded slopes—vague, grey, phantasmagoric; and down over everything floated the damp of fine rain.

Alec's heavy tread crunched the turfed bridle-path rhythmically, and from the stiff rim of his clerical hat the water dribbled on to his shoulders.

It was a rugged, irregular, almost uncouth face, and now the features were vacantly huddled in a set expression, obviously habitual. The cheeks were hunched up, almost concealing the small eyes; a wet wisp of hair straggled over the puckered forehead, and the ragged, fair moustache was spangled by the rain.

At his approach the sheep scampered up the fell-side; then, stood staring through the mist in anxious stupidity. And Alec, shaking the water from his hat, strode forward with an almost im-

perceptible gleam on his face. It was so that he liked the valley—all colourless and blurred, with the sky close overhead, like a low, leaden ceiling.

By-and-bye, a cluster of cottages loomed ahead—a choppy pool of black slate roofs, wanly a-glimmer in the wet. As he entered the village, a group of hard-featured men threw him a curt chorus of greetings, to which he raised his stick in response, mechanically.

He mounted the hill. Three furnace chimneys craned their thin necks to grime the sky with a dribbling, smoky breath; high on a bank of coal-dust, blurred silhouettes of trucks stood waiting in forlorn strings; women, limp, with unkempt hair, and loose, bedraggled skirts, stood round the doorways in gossiping groups.

"Which is Mrs. Matheson's?" he stopped to ask.

"There—oop there, Mr. Burkett—by yon ash—where them childer's standin'," they answered, all speaking together, eagerly. "Look ye! that be Mrs. Matheson herself."

Alec went up to the woman. His face clouded a little, and the puffs from his pipe came briskly in rapid succession.

"Mrs. Matheson, I've only just heard—Tell me, how did it happen?" he asked gently.

She was a stout, red-faced woman, and her eyes were all bloodshot with much crying. She wiped them hastily with the corner of her apron before answering.

"It was there, Mr. Burkett, by them rails. He was jest playin' aboot in t' road wi' Arnison's childer. At half-past one, t' grandmoothen stepped across to fetch me a jug o' fresh water an' she see'd him settin' in door there. Then—mabbee twenty minutes later—t' rain coome on an' I thought to go to fetch him in. But I couldna see na sign of him anywhere. We looked oop and doon, and thought, mabbee, he'd toddled roond to t' back. An' then, all at once, Dan Arnison called to us that he was leein' in t' water, doon in beck-pool. An' Dan ran straight doon, an' carried him oop to me; but 'twas na use. He was quite cold and drowned. An' I went——" But the sobs, rising thickly, swallowed the rest.

Alec put his hand on her shoulder soothingly.

"Ay, I know'd ye'd be grieved, Mr. Burkett. He was the bonniest boy in all t' parish."

She lifted the apron to her eyes again, while he crossed to the railings. The wood of the posts was splintered and worm-eaten, and the lower rail was broken away. Below, the rock shelved down some fifteen feet to the beck-pool, black and oily-looking.

"It's a very dangerous place," he said, half to himself.

"Ay, Mr. Burkett, you're right," interrupted a bent and wizened old woman, tottering forward.

"This be grandmoothen, Mr. Burkett," Mrs. Matheson explained. "'Twas grandmoothen that see'd him last——"

"Ay, Mr. Burkett," the old woman began in a high, tremulous treble. "When I went fer to fill t' jug fer Maggie he was a-settin' on t' steps there playin' with t' kitten, an' he called after me, 'Nanny!' quite happy-like; but I took na notice, but jest went on fer t' water. I shawed Mr. Allison the broken rail last month, when he was gittin' t' rents, and I told him he ought to put it into repair, with all them wee childer playin' all daytime on t' road. Didn't I, Maggie?" Mrs. Matheson assented incoherently. "An' he was very civil-like, was Mr. Allison, and he said he'd hev' it seen to. It's alus that way, Mr. Burkett," the old woman concluded, shaking her head wisely. "Folks wait till some accident occurs, and then they think to bestir themselves."

Alec turned to the mother, and touched her thick, nerveless hand.

"There, there, Mrs. Matheson, don't take on so," he said.

At his touch her sobbing suddenly ceased, and she let her apron fall.

"Will ye na coome inside, Mr. Burkett?" she asked.

And they all three went in together.

The little room had been scrubbed and tidied, and a number of chairs, ranged round the table, blocked the floor.

"We've bin busy all marnin', gittin' things a bit smartened oop for t' inquest. T' coroner's cooming at twelve," the grandmother explained.

"Will ye coome oop-stairs, Mr. Burkett—jest—jest to tak' a look at him?" Mrs. Matheson asked in a subdued voice.

Alec followed her, squeezing his burly frame up the narrow, creaking staircase.

The child lay on the clean, white bed. A look of still serenity slept on his pallid face. His tawny curls were smoothed back, and some snowdrops were scattered over the coverlet. All was quite simple.

Mrs. Matheson stood in the doorway, struggling noisily with her sobs.

"It is God's will," Alec said quietly.

"He was turned four last week," she blurted out. "Ye'll excuse me, Mr. Burkett, but I'm that overdone that I jest canna help myself," and she sank into a chair.

He knelt by the dead child's side and prayed, while the slow rise and fall of the mother's sobs filled the room. When he rose his eyes were all moist.

"God will help you, if you ask Him. His ways are secret. We cannot understand His purpose. But have faith in Him. He has done it for the best," he said.

"Ay, I know, I know, Mr. Burkett. But ye see he was the youngest, and that bonny——"

"Let me try to comfort you," he said.

* * * * *

When they came down-stairs again, her face was calmer and her voice steadier. The coroner, a

dapper man with a bright-red tie, was taking off his gloves and mackintosh ; the room was fast filling with silent figures, and the old grandmother was hobbling to and fro with noisy, excited importance.

“Will ye na stay for t’ inquest?”

Alec shook his head. “No, I can’t stop now. I have a School-board meeting to go to. But I will come up this afternoon.”

“Thank’ee, Mr. Burkett, God bless thee,” said Mrs. Matheson.

He shook hands with the coroner, who was grumbling concerning the weather ; then strode out back down the valley.

Though long since he had grown familiar with the aspects of suffering, that scene in the cottage, by reason of its very simplicity, had affected him strangely. His heart was full of slow sorrow for the woman’s trouble, and the image of the child, lying beautiful in its death-sleep, passed and re-passed in his mind.

By-and-bye, the moaning of the wind, the whirling of lost leaves, the inky shingle-beds that stained the fell-sides, inclined his thoughts to a listless brooding.

Life seemed dull, inevitable, draped in sombre, drifting shadows, like the valley-head. Yet in all good he saw the hand of God, a mysterious, invisible force, ever imperiously at work beneath the ravages of suffering and of sin.

It was close upon six o’clock when he reached

home. He was drenched to the skin, and as he sat before the fire, dense clouds of steam rose from his mud-stained boots and trousers.

"Now, Mr. Burkett, jest ye gang and tak' off them things, while I make yer tea. Ye'll catch yer death one of these days—I know ye will. I sometimes think ye haven't more sense than a boy, traipsin' about all t' day in t' wet, and niver takin' yer meals proper-like."

A faint smile flickered across his face. He was used to his landlady's scoldings.

"A child was drowned yesterday in the beck up at Beda Cottages. I had to go back there this afternoon to arrange about the funeral," he mumbled, half apologetically.

Mrs. Parkin snorted defiantly, bustling round the table as she spread the cloth. Presently she broke out again :

"An' noo, ye set there lookin' as white as a bogle. Why don't ye go an' git them wet clothes off? Ye're fair wringin'."

He obeyed ; though the effort to rise was great. He felt curiously cold : his teeth were clacking, and the warmth from the flames seemed delicious.

In his bedroom a dizziness caught him, and it was a moment before he could recognize the familiar objects. And he realized that he was ill, and looked at himself in the glass with a dull, scared expression. He struggled through his dressing, however, and went back to his tea. But, though

he had eaten nothing since the morning, he had no appetite ; so, from sheer force of habit, he lit a pipe, wheeling his chair close to the fire.

And, as the heat penetrated him, his thoughts spun aimlessly round the day's events, till these gradually drifted into the background of his mind, as it were, and he and they seemed to have become altogether detached. His forehead was burning, and a drowsy, delicious sense of physical weakness was stealing over his limbs. He was going to be ill, he remembered ; and it was with vague relief that he looked forward to the prospect of long days of monotonous inactivity, long days of repose from the daily routine of fatigue. The details of each day's work, the accomplishment of which, before, had appeared so indispensable, now, he felt in his lassitude, had faded to insignificance. Mrs. Parkin was right : he had been overdoing himself ; and with a clear conscience he would take a forced holiday in bed. Things in the parish would get along without him till the end of the week. There was only the drowned child's funeral, and, if he could not go, Milner, the neighbouring vicar, would take it for him. His pipe slipped from his hand to the hearthrug noiselessly, and his head sank forward. . . .

He was dreaming of the old churchyard. The trees were rocking their slim, bare arms ; drip, drip, drip, the drops pattered on to the tombstones, tight-huddled in the white, wet light of the moon ; the breath of the old churchyard tasted warm

and moist, like the reek of horses after a long journey.

The child's funeral was finished. Mrs. Matheson had cried noisily into her apron; the mourners were all gone now; and alone, he sat down on the fresh-dug grave. By the moonlight he tried to decipher the names carved on the slabs; but most of the letters had faded away, and moss-cushions had hidden the rest. Then he found it—"George Matheson, aged four years and five days," and underneath were carved Mrs. Matheson's words: "He was the bonniest boy in all the parish." He sat on, with the dread of death upon him, the thought of that black senselessness ahead, possessing him, so sudden, so near, so intimate, that it seemed entirely strange to have lived on, forgetful of it. By-and-bye, he saw her coming towards him—Ethel, like a figure from a picture, wearing a white dress that trailed behind her, a red rose pinned at the waist, and the old smile on her lips. And she came beside him, and told him how her husband had gone away for ever, and he understood at once that he and she were betrothed again, as it had been five years ago. He tried to answer her, but somehow the words would not come; and, as he was striving to frame them, there came a great crash. A bough clattered down on the tombstones; and with a start he awoke.

A half-burned coal was smoking in the fender. He felt as if he had been sleeping for many hours.

He fell to stupidly watching the red-heat, as it pulsed through the caves of coal, to imagining himself climbing their ashen mountain-ridges, across dark defiles, up the face of treacherous precipices. . . .

Hundreds of times, here, in this room, in this chair, before this fire, he had sat smoking, picturing the old scenes to himself, musing of Ethel Fulton (Ethel Winn she had been then ; but, after her marriage, he had forced himself to think of her as bearing her husband's name—that was a mortification from which he had derived a sort of bitter satisfaction). But now, with the long accumulation of his solitude—five years he had been vicar of Scarsdale—he had grown so unconscious of self, so indifferent to the course of his own existence, that every process of his mind had, from sheer lack of external stimulation, stagnated, till, little by little, the growth of mechanical habit had come to mould its shape and determine its limitations. And hence, not for a moment had he ever realized the grip that this habit of sentimental reminiscence had taken on him, nor the grotesque extent of its futile repetition. Such was the fervour of his attitude towards his single chapter of romance.

Five years ago, she and he had promised their lives to one another. And the future had beckoned them onward, gaily, belittling every obstacle in its suffusion of glad, alluring colour. He was poor : he had but his curate's stipend, and she was used to a regular routine of ease. But he would have

tended her wants, waiting on her, watching over her, indefatigably; chastening all the best that was in him, that he might lay it at her feet. And together, hand in hand, they would have laboured in God's service. At least so it seemed to him now.

Then had come an enforced separation; and later, after a prolonged, unaccountable delay, a letter from her explaining, in trite, discursive phrases, how it could never be—it was a mistake—she had not known her own mind—now she could see things clearer—she hoped he would forgive and forget her.

A wild determination to go at once to her, to plead with her, gripped him; but for three days he was helpless, bound fast by parish duties. And when at last he found himself free, he had already begun to perceive the hopelessness of such an errand, and, with crushed and dogged despair, to accept his fate as irrevocable.

In his boyhood—at the local grammar-school, where his ugliness had made him the butt of his class—and later, at an insignificant Oxford college, where, to spare his father, whose glebe was at the time untenanted, he had set himself grimly to live on an impossibly slender allowance—at every turn of his life, he had found himself at a disadvantage with his fellows. Thus he had suffered much, dumbly—meekly many would have said—without a sign of resentment, or desire for retaliation. But all the while, in his tenacious, long-suffering way,

he was stubbornly inuring himself to an acceptance of his own disqualifications. And so, once rudely awakened from his dream of love, he wondered with heavy curiosity at his faith in its glamorous reality, and, remembering the tenour of his life, suffered bitterly like a man befooled by his own conceit.

Some months after the shattering of his romance, the rumour reached him that James Fulton, a prosperous solicitor in the town, was courting her. The thing was impossible, a piece of idle gossip, he reasoned with himself. Before long, however, he heard it again, in a manner that left no outlet for doubt.

It seemed utterly strange, unaccountable, that she, whose eager echoing of all his own spiritual fervour and enthusiasm for the work of the Church still rang in his ears, should have chosen a man, whose sole talk had seemed to be of dogs and of horses, of guns and of game; a man thick-minded, unthinking, self-complacent; a man whom he himself had carelessly despised as devoid of any spark of spirituality.

And, at this moment, when the first smartings of bitter bewilderment were upon him, the little living of Scarsdale fell vacant, and his rector, perhaps not unmindful of his trouble, suggested that he should apply for it.

The valley was desolate and full of sombre beauty; the parish, sparsely-peopled but extensive; the life there would be monotonous, almost

grim, with long hours of lonely brooding. The living was offered to him. He accepted it excitedly.

And there, busied with his new responsibilities, throwing himself into the work with a suppressed, ascetic ardour, news of the outside world reached him vaguely, as if from afar.

He read of her wedding in the local newspaper : later, a few trite details of her surroundings ; and then, nothing more.

But her figure remained still resplendent in his memory, and, as time slipped by, grew into a sort of gleaming shrine, incarnating for him all the beauty of womanhood. And gradually, this incarnation grew detached, as it were, from her real personality, so that, when twice a year he went back to spend Sunday with his old rector, to preach a sermon in the parish church, he felt no shrinking dread lest he should meet her. He had long ceased to bear any resentment against her, or to doubt that she had done what was right. The part that had been his in the little drama seemed altogether of lesser importance.

* * * * *

All night he lay feverishly tossing, turning his pillow aglow with heat, from side to side ; anxiously reiterating whole incoherent conversations and jumbled incidents.

At intervals, he was dimly conscious of the hiss of wind-swept leaves outside, and of rain-gusts rattling the window-panes ; and later, of the

sickly light of early morning streaking the ceiling with curious patterns. By-and-bye, he dropped into a fitful sleep, and forgot the stifling heat of his bed.

Then the room had grown half full of daylight, and Mrs. Parkin was there, fidgeting with the curtains. She said something which he did not hear, and he mumbled that he had slept badly, and that his head was aching.

Some time later—how long he did not know—she appeared again, and a man, whom he presently understood to be a doctor, and who put a thermometer, the touch of which was deliciously cool, under his armpit, and sat down at the table to write. Mrs. Parkin and he talked in whispers at the foot of the bed: they went away; Mrs. Parkin brought him a cup of beef-tea and some toast; and then he remembered only the blurred memories of queer, unfinished dreams.

Consciousness seemed to return to him all of a sudden; and, when it was come, he understood dimly that, somehow, the fatigue of long pain was over, and he tasted the peaceful calm of utter lassitude.

He lay quite still, his gaze following Mrs. Parkin, as she moved to and fro across the room, till it fell on a basket-full of grapes that stood by the bedside. They were unfamiliar, inexplicable; they puzzled him; and for awhile he feebly turned the matter over in his mind. Presently she glanced at him, and he lifted his hand towards the basket.

"Would ye fancy a morsel o' fruit noo? 'Twas Mrs. Fulton that sent 'em," she said.

She held the basket towards him, and he lifted a bunch from it. They were purple grapes, large and luscious-looking. Ethel had sent them. How strange that was! For an instant he doubted if he were awake, and clutched the pillow to make sure that it was real.

"Mrs. Fulton sent them?" he repeated.

"Ay, her coachman came yesterday in t' forenoon to inquire how ye were farin', and left that fruit for ye. Ay, Mr. Burkett, but ye've had a mighty quantity o' callers. Most all t' parish has been askin' for news o' ye. An' that poor woman from t' factory cottages has been doon forenoon and night."

"How long have I been in bed?" he asked after a pause.

"Five days and five nights. Ye've bin nigh at death's door, ravin' and moanin' like a madman. But, noo, I mustna keep ye chatterin'. Ye should jest keep yeself quiet till t' doctor coomes. He'll be mighty surprised to find ye so much improved, and in possession of yer faculties."

And she left him alone.

He lay staring at the grapes, while excitement quickened every pulse. Ethel had sent them—they were from Ethel—Ethel had sent them—through his brain, to and fro, boisterously, the thought danced. And then, he started to review the past, dispassionately, critically, as if it were

another man's; and soon, every detail, as he lingered on it, seemed to disentangle itself, till it all achieved a curious simplification. The five years at Scarsdale became all blurred: they resembled an eventless waste-level, through which he had been mechanically trudging. But the other day, it seemed, he was with her—he and she betrothed to one another. A dozen scenes passed before his eyes: with a flush of hot, intolerable shame, he saw himself, clumsy, uncouth, devoid of personal charm, viewing her bluntly, selfishly through the cumbrous medium of his own personality. And her attitude was clear too; the glamour, woven of habitual, sentimental reminiscence, faded, as it were, from her figure, and she appeared to him simply and beautifully human; living, vibrating, frail. *Now* he knew the meaning of that last letter of hers—the promptings of each phrase; the outpourings of his ideals, enthusiasms, aspirations—callow, blatant, crude, he named them bitterly—had scared her: she had felt herself unequal to the strain of the life he had offered her: in her lovable, womanish frailty, she had grown to dread it; and he realized all that she had suffered before she had brought herself to end it—the long struggles with doubt and suspense. The veil that had clogged his view was lifted: he knew her now: he could read the writing on her soul: he was securely equipped for loving her; and now, she had passed out of his life, beyond recall. In

his blindness he had not recognized her, and had driven her away.

How came it that to-day, for the first time, all these things were made clear?

The clock struck; and while he was listening to its fading note, the door-handle clicked briskly, and the doctor walked in. He talked cheerily of the crops damaged by the storm, and the sound of his voice seemed to vibrate harshly through the room.

"There's a heavy shower coming up," he remarked. "By the way, you're quite alone here, Mr. Burkett, I believe. Have you no relatives whom you would like to send for?"

"No—no one," Alec answered. "Mrs. Parkin will look after me."

"Yes—but you see," and he came and sat down by the bedside, "I don't say there's any immediate danger; but you've had a very near touch of it. Now isn't there any old friend?—you ought not to be alone like this." He spoke the last words with emphasis.

Alec shook his head. His gaze had fallen on the basket of grapes again: he was incoherently musing of Ethel.

"Mind, I don't say there's any immediate danger," he heard the man repeating; "but I must tell you that you're not altogether out of the wood yet."

He paused.

"You ought to be prepared for the worst, Mr. Burkett."

The last phrase lingered in Alec's mind ; and slowly its meaning dawned upon him.

"You mean I might die at any moment?" he asked.

"No, no—I don't say that," the other answered evasively. "But you see the fever has left you very weak ; and of course in such cases one can never be quite sure——"

The rest did not reach Alec's ears ; he was only vaguely aware of the murmur of the man's voice.

Presently he perceived that he had risen.

"I will come back in the afternoon," he was saying. "I'll tell Mrs.—Mrs. Parker to bring you in some breakfast."

After the doctor had gone he dozed a little . . . Then remembered the man's words—"No immediate danger, but you must be prepared for the worst." The sense of it all flashed upon him : he understood what the man had meant : that was the way doctors always told such things, he guessed. So the end was near . . . He wondered, a little curiously, if it would come before to-night, or to-morrow . . . It was near, quite near, he repeated to himself ; and gradually, a peacefulness permeated his whole being, and he was vaguely glad to be alone. . . .

A little while, and he would be near God. He felt himself detached from the world, and at peace with all men.

His life, as he regarded it trailing behind him, across the stretch of past years, seemed inadequate, useless, pitiable almost ; of his own personality, as he now realized it, he was ashamed—petty mortifications, groping efforts, a grotesque capacity for futile, melancholy brooding—he rejoiced that he was to have done with it. The end was near, quite near, he repeated once again.

Then, afterwards, would come rest—the infinite rest of the Saviour's tenderness, and the strange, wonderful expectation of the mysterious life to come . . . A glimpse of his own serenity, of his own fearlessness, came to him ; and he was moved by a quick flush of gratitude towards God. He thought of the terror of the atheist's death—the world, a clod of dead matter blindly careering through space ; humanity, a casual, senseless growth, like the pullulating insects on a rotting tree. . . .

A little while, only a little while, and he would be near God. And, softly, under his breath, he implored pardon for the countless shortcomings of his service. . . .

The German clock on the mantel-piece ticked with methodical fussiness : the flames in the grate flickered lower and lower ; and one by one dropped, leaving dull-red cinders. Through the window, under the half-drawn blind, was the sky, cold with the hard, white glare of the winter sun, flashing above the bare, bony mountain-backs ; and he called to mind spots in the little, desolate parish,

which, with a grim, clinging love, he had come to regard as his own for always. Who would come after him, live in this house of his, officiate in the square, grey-walled church, move and work in God's service among the people? . . .

And, while he lay drowsily musing on the unfinished dream, a muffled murmur of women's voices reached his ears. By an intuition, akin perhaps to animal instinct, he knew all at once that it was she, talking with Mrs. Parkin down in the room below. Prompted by a rush of imperious impulse he raised himself on his elbow to listen.

There was a rustling of skirts in the passage and the sound of the voices grew clearer.

"Good-day, ma'am, and thank ye very kindly, I'm sure," Mrs. Parkin was saying.

No reply came, though he was straining every nerve to catch it . . . At last, subdued, but altogether distinct, *her* voice—

"You're sure there's nothing else I can send?"

The door of his room was ajar. He dug his nails into the panel-edge, and tried to swing it open. But he could scarcely move it, and in a moment she would be gone.

Suddenly he heard his own voice—loud and queer it sounded:

"Ethel—Ethel."

Hurried steps mounted the stairs, and Mrs. Parkin's white cap and spectacled face appeared.

"What be t' matter, Mr. Burkett?" she asked breathlessly.

"Stop her—tell her."

"Dearie, dearie me, he's off wanderin' agin."

"No, no ; I'm all right—tell—ask Mrs. Fulton if she would come up to see me ?"

"There, there, Mr. Burkett, don't ye excite yeself. Ye're not fit to see any one, ye know that. Lie ye doon agin, or ye'll be catchin' yer death o' cauld."

"Ask her to come, please—just for a minute."

"For Heaven's sake lie doon. Ye'll be workin' yeself into a fever next. There, there, I'll ask her for ye, though I've na notion what t' doctor 'ud say."

She drew down the blind and retired, closing the door quietly behind her.

The next thing he saw was Ethel standing by his bedside.

He lay watching her without speaking. She wore a red dress trimmed with fur ; a gold bracelet was round her gloved wrist, and a veil half hid her features.

Presently he perceived that she was very white, that her mouth was twitching, and that her eyes were full of tears.

"Alec—I'm so sorry you're so ill . . . Are you in pain ?"

He shook his head absently. Her veil and the fur on her cloak looked odd, he thought, in the half-light of the room.

"You will be better soon : the worst is over."

"No," he answered, with a dreary smile. "I am going to die."

She burst into sobs.

"No, no, Alec . . . You must not think that."

He stretched his arm over the coverlet towards her, and felt the soft pressure of her gloved hand.

"Forgive me, Ethel, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to pain you. But it is so ; the doctor told me this morning."

She sat down by the bedside, still crying, pressing her handkerchief to her eyes.

"Ethel, how strange it seems. Do you know I haven't seen you since I left Cockermouth?" The words came deliberately, for his mind had grown quite calm. "How the time has flown!"

Her grasp on his hand tightened, but she made no answer.

"It was very kind of you to come all this way, Ethel, to see me. Will you stay a little and let me talk to you? It's more than five years since we talked together, you know," and he smiled faintly. "Don't cry so, Ethel dear. I did not mean to make you cry. There's no cause to cry, dear ; you've made me so happy."

"My poor, poor Alec," she sobbed.

"You'd almost forgotten the old days, perhaps," he continued dreamily, talking half to himself ; "for it's a long while ago now. But to me it seems as if it had all just happened. You see I've been vegetating rather, here in this lonely, little place . . . Don't go on crying, Ethel dear . . .

let me tell you about things a little. There's no harm in it now, because you know I'm——"

"Oh! don't—don't say that. You'll get better. I know you will."

"No, Ethel, I shan't. Something within me tells me that my course is done. Besides, I don't want to get better. I'm so happy . . . Stay a little with me, Ethel . . . I wanted to explain . . . I was stupid, selfish, in the old days——"

"It was I—I who——" she protested through her tears.

"No, you were quite right to write me that letter. I've thought that almost from the first . . . I'm sure of it," he added, as if convincing himself definitely. "It could never be . . . it was my fault . . . I was stupid and boorish and wrapped up in myself. I did not try to understand your nature . . . I didn't understand anything about women . . . I never had a sister . . . I took for granted that you were always thinking and feeling just as I was. I never tried to understand you, Ethel . . . I was not fit to be entrusted with you."

"Alec, Alec, it is not true. You were too good, too noble-hearted. I felt you were far above me. Beside you I felt I was silly and frivolous. Your standards about everything seemed so high——"

But he interrupted, unheeding her:

"You don't know, Ethel, how happy you've made me . . . I have thought of you every day.

In the evenings, I used to sit alone, remembering you and all the happy days we had together, and the remembrance of them has been a great joy to me. I used to go over them all, again and again. The day that we all went to Morecambe, and that walk along the sea-shore, when the tide caught us, and I carried you across the water . . . the time that we went to those ruins, and you wore the primroses I picked for you. And I used to read over all your letters, and remember all the things you used to say. Down-stairs, under the writing-table, there is a black, tin cash-box—the key is on my bunch—Mrs. Parkin will give it you. It's where I've kept everything that has reminded me of you, all this time. Will you take it back with you? . . . You don't know how you've helped me all these years—I wanted to tell you that . . . When I was in difficulties, I used to wonder how you would have liked me to act . . . When I was lonely and low-spirited, I used to tell myself that you were happy." He paused for breath, and his voice died slowly in the stillness of the room. "You were quite right," he murmured almost inaudibly, "I see it all quite clearly now."

She was bending over him, and was framing his face in her two hands.

"Say I was wrong," she pleaded passionately. "Say I was wicked, wrong. I loved you, Alec . . . I was promised to you. I should have been so happy with you, dear . . . Alec, my Alec, do not die . . . God will not let you die . . . He cannot

be so cruel . . . Come back, Alec I love you . . . Do you hear, my Alec? I love you . . . Ethel loves you . . . Before God I love you . . . I was promised to you . . . I broke my word . . . I loved you all the time, but I did not know it . . . Forgive me, my Alec . . . forgive me . . . I shall love you always."

He passed his fingers over her forehead tentatively, as if he were in darkness.

"Ethel, every day, every hour, all these years, you have been with me. And now I am going away. Kiss me—just once—just once. There can be no wrong in it now."

She tore her veil from her face: their lips met, and her head rested a moment, sobbing, on his shoulder.

"Hush! don't cry, Ethel dear, don't cry. You have made me so glad . . . And you will remember to take the box . . . And you will think of me sometimes . . . And I shall pray God to make you happy, and I shall wait for you, Ethel, and be with you in thought, and if you have trouble, you will know that I shall be sorrowing with you. Isn't it so, dear? . . . Now, good-bye, dear one—good-bye. May God watch over you."

She had moved away. She came back again, however, and kissed his forehead reverently. But he was not aware of her return, for his mind had begun to wander.

She brushed past Mrs. Parkin in the passage, bidding her an incoherent good-bye: she was

instinctively impatient to escape to the protection of familiar surroundings. Inside the house, she felt helpless, dizzy; the melodrama of the whole scene had stunned her senses, and pity for him was rushing through her in waves of pulsing emotion.

As she passed the various landmarks, which she had noted on her outward journey—a group of Scotch firs, a roofless cattle-shed, a pile of felled trees—each seemed to wear an altered aspect. With what a strange suddenness it had all happened! Yesterday the groom had brought back word that he was in delirium, and had told her of the loneliness of the house. It had seemed so sad, his lying ill, all alone: the thought had preyed on her conscience, till she had started to drive out there to inquire if there were anything she could do to help him. Now, every corner round which the cart swung, lengthened the stretch of road that separated her from that tragic scene in his room . . . Perhaps it was not right for her to drive home and leave him? But she couldn't bear to stay; it was all so dreadful. Besides, she assured herself, she could do no good. There was the doctor, and that old woman who nursed him—they would see to everything . . . Poor, poor Alec—alone in that grey-walled cottage, pitched at the far end of this long, bleak valley—the half-darkened room—his wasted, feverish face—and his *knowing* that he could not live—it all came back to her vividly, and she shivered as if with cold. Death seemed

hideous, awful, almost wicked in the cruelty of its ruthlessness. And the homeward drive loomed ahead, interminably—for two hours she would have to wait with the dreadful, flaring remembrance of it all—two hours—for the horse was tired, and it was thirteen miles, a man by the roadside had told her. . . .

He was noble-hearted, saint-like . . . Her pity for him welled up once more, and she convinced herself that she could have loved him, worshipped him, been worthy of him as a husband—and now he lay dying. He had revealed his whole nature to her, it seemed. No one had ever understood, as she did now, what a fine character he was in reality. Her cheeks grew hot with indignation and shame, as she remembered how she had heard people laugh at him behind his back, refer to him mockingly as the “love-sick curate.” And all this while—for five whole years—he had gone on caring for her—thinking of her each day, reading her letters, recalling the things she used to say—yes, those were his very words. Before, she had never suspected that it was in his nature to take it so horribly tragically; yet, somehow, directly he had fixed his eyes on her in that excited way, she had half guessed it. . . .

The horse's trot slackened to a walk, and the wheels crunched over a bed of newly-strewn stones . . . She was considering how much of what had happened she could relate to Jim. Oh! the awfulness of his *knowing beforehand* like that!

She had kissed him: she had told him that she cared for him: she hadn't been able to help doing that. There was no harm in it; she had made him happier—he had said so himself . . . But Jim wouldn't understand: he would be angry with her for having gone, perhaps. He wouldn't see that she couldn't have done anything else. No, she couldn't bear to tell him: besides, it seemed somehow like treachery to Alec . . . Oh! it must be awful to *know beforehand* like that! . . . The doctor should never have told him. It was horrible, cruel . . . In the past how she had been to blame—she saw that now: thoughtless, selfish, altogether beneath him.

It was like a chapter in a novel. His loving her silently all these years, and telling her about it on his deathbed. At the thought of it she thrilled with subtle pride: it illuminated the whole ordinariness of her life. The next moment the train of her own thoughts shamed her. Poor, poor Alec. . . . And to reinforce her pity, she recalled the tragic setting of the scene.

That woman—his landlady—could she have heard anything? she wondered with a twinge of dread. No, the door was shut, and his voice had been very low.

The horse turned on to the main road, and pricking his ears, quickened his pace.

She would remember him always. Every day, she would think of him, as he had asked her to do—she would never forget to do that. And, if she

were in trouble, or difficulty, she would turn her thoughts towards him, just as he had told her he used to do. She would try to become better—more religious—for his sake. She would read her Bible each morning, as she knew had been his habit. These little things were all she could do now. Her attitude in the future she would make worthy of his in the past . . . He would become the secret guiding-star of her life : *it* would be her hidden chapter of romance. . . .

The box—that box which he had asked her to take. She had promised, and she had forgotten it. How could she get it? It was too late to turn back now. Jim would be waiting for her. She would only just be in time for dinner as it was. . . . How could she get it? If she wrote to his landlady, and asked her to send it—it was under the writing-table in the sitting-room he had said. . . . She *must* get it, somehow. . . .

It was dark before she reached home. Jim was angry with her for being late, and for having driven all the way without a servant. She paid no heed to his upbraiding ; but told him shortly that Alec was still in great danger. He muttered some perfunctory expression of regret, and went off to the stables to order a bran-mash for the horse. His insensibility to the importance of the tragedy she had been witnessing, exasperated her : she felt bitterly mortified that he could not divine all that she had been suffering.

. * * * * *

The last of the winter months went, and life in the valley swept its sluggish course onwards. The bleak, spring winds rollicked, hooting from hill to hill. The cattle waited for evening, huddled under the walls of untrimmed stone ; and before the fire-side, in every farmhouse, new-born lambs lay helplessly bleating. On Sundays the men would loaf in churlish groups about the church door, jerk curt greetings at one another, and ask for news of Parson Burkett. It was a curate from Cocker-mouth who took the services in his stead—one of the new-fangled sort ; a young gentleman from London way, who mouthed his words like a girl, carried company manners, and had a sight of strange clerical practices.

Alec was slowly recovering. The fever had altogether left him : a straw-coloured beard now covered his chin, and his cheeks were grown hollow and peaky-looking. But by the hay-harvest, the doctor reckoned, he would be as strong as ever again—so it was commonly reported.

Mrs. Parkin declared that the illness had done him a world o' good. "It's rested his mind like, and kept him from frettin'. He was alus ower given to studyin' on his own thoughts, till he got dazed like and took na notice o' things. An' noo," she would conclude, "ye should jest see him, smilin' as free as a child."

So day after day floated vaguely by, and to Alec the calm of their unbroken regularity was delicious. He was content to lie still for hours,

thinking of nothing, remembering nothing, tasting the torpor of dreamy contemplation; watching through the window the slow drifting of the shadows; listening to the cackling of geese, and the plaintive bleating of sheep. . . .

By-and-bye, with returning strength, his senses quickened, and grew sensitive to every passing impression. To eat with elaborate deliberation his invalid meals; to watch the myriad specks of gold dancing across a bar of sunlight—these were sources of keen, exciting delight. But in the foreground of his mind, transfiguring with its glamour every trivial thought, flashed the memory of Ethel's visit. He lived through the whole scene again and again, picturing her veiled figure as it had stood by the bedside, wrapped in the red, fur cloak; and her protesting words, her passionate tears, seemed to form a mystic, indissoluble bond between them, that brightened all the future with rainbow colours.

God had given him back to her. Whether circumstances brought them together frequently, or whether they were forced to live their lives almost wholly apart, would, he told himself, matter but little. Their spiritual communion would remain unbroken. Indeed, the prospect of such separations, proving, as it did to him, the sureness of the bond between them, almost elated him. There would be unquestioning trust between them, and, though the world had separated them, the best that was in him belonged to her. When at length they met, there would be no need for insistence on

common points of feeling, for repeated handling of past threads, as was customary with ordinary friendships. Since each could read the other's heart, that sure intuition born of chastened, spiritual love would be theirs. If trouble came to her, he would be there to sacrifice all at a moment's bidding, after the fashion of the knights of old. Because she knew him, she would have faith in him. To do her service would be his greatest joy.

At first the immobile, isolated hours of his convalescence made all these things appear simple and inevitable, like the events of a great dream. As time went on, however, he grew to chafe against his long confinement, to weary of his weakness, and of the familiar sight of every object in the room; and in the mornings, when Mrs. Parkin brought him his breakfast, he found himself longing for a letter from her—some brief word of joy that he was recovering. He yearned for some material object, the touch of which would recall her to him, as if a particle of her personality had impregnated the atoms.

Sometimes, he would force himself into believing that she would appear again, drive out to learn the progress of his recovery . . . After luncheon she would leave home . . . about half-past one, probably . . . soon after three, he would see her . . . Now, she was nearing the cross-roads . . . now climbing the hill past Longrigg's farm . . . she would have to walk the horse there . . . now, crossing the old bridge. He would lie watching

the clock ; and when the suspense grew intolerable, to cheat it, he would bury his head in the pillow to count up to a thousand, before glancing at the hands again. So would slip by the hour of her arrival ; still, he would struggle to delude himself with all manner of excuses for her—she had been delayed—she had missed the turning, and had been compelled to retrace her steps. And, when at length the twilight had come, he would start to assure himself that it was to be to-morrow, and sink into a fitful dozing, recounting waking dreams of her, subtly intoxicating. . . .

* * * * *

In April came a foretaste of summer, and, for an hour or two every day, he was able to hobble down-stairs. He perceived the box at once, lying in its accustomed place, and concluded that on learning that he was out of danger, she had sent it back to him. The sight of it cheered him with indefinable hope : it seemed to signify a fresh token of her faith in him : it had travelled with her back to Cockermouth on that wonderful day which had brought them together ; and now, in his eyes, it was invested with a new preciousness. He unlocked it, and, somehow, to discover that its contents had not been disturbed, was a keen disappointment. He longed for proof that she had been curious to look into it, that she had thus been able to realize how he had prized every tiny object that had been consecrated for him by her. Then it flashed across him that she herself might have

brought the box back, and fearing to disturb him, had gone home again without asking to see him. All that evening he brooded over this supposition ; yet shrank from putting any question to Mrs. Parkin. But the following morning, a sudden impulse overcame his repugnance ; and the next moment he had learned the truth. Untouched, unmoved, the box had remained all the while—she had never taken it—she had forgotten it. And depression swept through him ; for it seemed that his ideal had tottered.

His prolonged isolation and his physical lassitude had quickened his emotions to an abnormal sensibility, and had led him to a constant fingering, as it were, of his successive sentimental phases. And these, since they constituted his sole diversion, he had unconsciously come to regard as of supreme importance. The cumbersome, complex details of life in the outside world had assumed the simplification of an indistinct background : in his vision of her figure he had perceived no perspective.

But now the grain of doubt was sown : it germinated insidiously ; and soon, the whole complexion of his attitude towards her was transformed. All at once he saw a whole network of unforeseen obstacles, besetting each detail of the prospect he had been planning. Swarming uncertainty fastened on him at every turn ; till at last, goaded to desperation, he stripped the gilding from the accumulated fabric of his idealized future.

And then his passion for her flamed up—ardent,

unreasoning, human. After all, he loved as other men loved—that was the truth: the rest was mere calfish meandering. Stubbornly he vindicated to himself his right to love her He was a man—a creature of flesh and blood, and every fibre within him was crying out for her—for the sight of her face; the sound of her voice; the clasp of her hand. Body and soul he loved her; body and soul he yearned for her. . . . She had come back to him, she was his again—with passionate tears she had told him that she loved him. To fight for her, he was ready to abandon all else. At the world's laws he giped bitterly; before God they were man and wife.

The knowledge that it lay in his power to make her his for life, to bind her to him irrevocably, brought him intoxicating relief. Henceforward he would live on, but for that end. Existence without her would be dreary, unbearable. He would resign his living and leave the Church. Together they would go away, abroad: he would find some work to do in the great cities of Australia She was another man's wife—but the sin would be his—*his*, not hers—God would so judge it; and for her sake he would suffer the punishment. Besides, he told himself exultantly, the sin, was it not already committed? “Whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her, hath committed adultery with her already in his heart.”

He would go to her, say to her simply that he was come for her. It should be done openly,

honestly in the full light of day. New strength and deep-rooted confidence glowed within him. The wretched vacillation of his former self was put away like an old garment. Once more he sent her words of love sounding in his ears—the words that had made them man and wife before God. And on, the train of his thoughts whirled : visions of a hundred scenes flitted before his eyes—he and she together as man and wife, in a new home across the seas, where the past was all forgotten, and the present was redolent of the sure joy of perfect love. . . .

* * * * *

He was growing steadily stronger. Pacing the floor of his room, or the gravel-path before the house, when the sun was shining, each day he would methodically measure the progress of his strength. He hinted of a long sea voyage to the doctor : the man declared that it would be madness to start before ten days had elapsed. Ten days—the stretch of time seemed absurd, intolerable. But a quantity of small matters relating to the parish remained to be set in order : he had determined to leave no confusion behind him. So he mapped out a daily task for himself : thus he could already begin to work for her : thus each day's accomplishment would bring him doubly nearer to her. The curate, who had been taking his duty, came once or twice at his request to help him ; for he was jealously nursing his small stock

of strength. He broke the news of his approaching departure to Mrs. Parkin, and asked her to accept the greater portion of his furniture, as an inadequate token of his gratitude towards her for all she had done for him. The good creature wept copiously, pestered him with questions concerning his destination, and begged him to give her news of him in the future. Next he sent for a dealer from Cockermouth to buy the remainder, and disputed with him the price of each object tenaciously.

One afternoon his former rector appeared, and with tremulous cordiality wished him God-speed, assuming that the sea voyage was the result of doctor's advice. And it was when the old man was gone, and he was alone again, that, for the first time, with a spasm of pain, he caught a glimpse of the deception he was practising. But some irresistible force within him urged him forward—he was powerless—to look back was impossible now—there was more yet to be done—he must go on—there was no time to stop to think. So to deaden the rising conscience-pangs he fiercely reminded himself that now, but five days more separated her from him. He sat down to write to his bishop and resign his living, struggling with ambiguous, formal phrases, impetuously attributing to his physical weakness his inability to frame them.

The letter at length finished, instinctively dreading fresh gnawings of uneasiness, he forced himself feverishly into thinking of plans for the future,

busying his mind with time-tables, searching for particulars of steamers, turning over the leaves of his bank-book. All the money which his father had left to him had remained untouched : for three years they could live comfortably on the capital ; meanwhile he would have found some work.

At last, when, with the growing twilight, the hills outside were hurriedly darkening, he sank back wearily in his chair. And all at once he perceived with dismay that nothing remained for him to do, nothing with which he could occupy his mind. For the moment he was alone with himself, and looking backwards, realization of the eager facility with which he had successively severed each link, and the rapidity with which he had set himself drifting towards a future, impenetrable with mysterious uncertainty, stole over him. He had done it all, he told himself, deliberately, unaided ; bewildered, he tried to bring himself face to face with his former self, to survey himself as he had been before the fever—that afternoon when he had gone up to Beda Cottages—plodding indifferently through life in the joyless, walled-in valley, which, he now understood, had in a measure reflected the spirit of his own listless broodings. Scared remorse seized him. The prospect of departure, now that it was close at hand, frightened him ; left him aching as with the burden of dead weight, so that, for a while, he remained inert, dully acquiescing in his accumulating disquietude.

Then, in desperation, he invoked her figure,

imagining a dozen incoherent versions of the coming scene—the tense words of greeting, his passionate pleading, her impulsive yielding, and the acknowledgment of her trust in him. . . .

By-and-bye, Mrs. Parkin brought him his dinner. He chatted to her with apparent unconcern, jested regarding his appetite ; for a curious calm, the lucidity evoked by suppressed elation, pervaded him.

But through the night he tossed restlessly, waking in the darkness to find himself throbbing with triumphant exhilaration ; each time striking matches to examine the face of his watch, and beginning afresh to calculate the hours that separated him from the moment that was to bind them together—the irrevocable starting towards the future years.

* * * * *

She stood in the bow-window of her drawing-room, arranging some cut flowers in slender pink and blue vases, striped with enamel of imitation gold. Behind her, the room, uncomfortably ornamental, repeated the three notes of colour—gilt paper shavings filling the grate ; gilt-legged chairs and tables ; stiff, shiny, pink chintzes encasing the furniture ; on the wall a blue-patterned paper, all speckled with stars of gold.

Outside, the little lawn, bathed in the fresh morning sunlight, glowed a luscious green, and the trim flower-beds swelled with heightened colours. A white fox-terrier came waddling along the

garden path: she lifted the animal inside the window, stroking his sleek sides with an effusive demonstration of affection. Would Jim remember to be home in good time? she was idly wondering; she had forgotten to remind him before he went to his office, that to-night she was to sing at a local concert.

Suddenly, she caught sight of a man's figure crossing the lawn. For an instant she thought it was an old clerk, whom Jim sometimes employed to carry messages. Then she saw that it was Alec—coming straight towards her. Her first impulse was to escape from him; but noticing that his gaze was fixed on the ground, she retreated behind an angle of the window, and stood watching him . . . Poor Alec! He was going away on a sea voyage for his health, so Jim had heard it said in the town; and she formed a hasty resolve to be very kind to the poor fellow. Yet her vanity felt a prick of pique, as she noticed that his gait was grown more gaunt, more ungainly than ever; and she resented that his haggard face, his stubbly beard, which, when he lay ill, had signified tense tragedy, should now seem simply uncouth. Still, she awaited his appearance excitedly; anticipating a renewed proof of his touching, dog-like devotion to her, and with a fresh thrill of unconscious gratitude to him for having supplied that scene to which she could look back with secret, sentimental pride.

The maid let him into the room. As he ad-

vanced towards her, she saw him brush his forehead with his hand impatiently, as if to rid his brain of an importunate thought. He took her outstretched hand: the forced cheeriness of her phrase of greeting died away, as she felt his gaze searching her face.

"Let us sit down," he said abruptly.

"I'm all right again, now," he began with a brisk, level laugh; and it occurred to her that perhaps the illness had affected his mind.

"I'm so glad of that," she stammered in reply; "so very glad . . . And you're going away, aren't you, for a long sea voyage? That will do you ever so much good——"

But before she had finished speaking, he was kneeling on the carpet before her, pouring out incoherent phrases. Bewildered, she gazed at him, only noticing the clumsy breadth of his shoulders.

"Listen to me, Ethel, listen," he was saying. "Everything is ready—I've given it all up—my living—the Church. I can't bear it any longer—life without you, I mean . . . You are everything to me—I only want you—I care for nothing else now. I am going away to Australia. You will come with me, Ethel—you said you loved me . . . We love one another—come with me—let us start life afresh. I can't go on living without you . . . I thought it would be easy for you to come; I see now that perhaps it's difficult. You have your home: I see that . . . But have trust in me—I

will make it up to you. Together we will start afresh—make a new home—a new life. I will give you every moment ; I will be your slave . . . Listen to me, Ethel ; let us go away. Everything is ready—I've got money—I've arranged everything. We can go up to London to-morrow. The steamer starts on Thursday."

The sound of his voice ceased. She was staring at the door, filled with dread lest it should open, and the maid should see him kneeling on the carpet.

"Don't," she exclaimed, grasping his coat. "Get up, quick."

He rose, awkwardly she thought, and stood before her.

"We were so happy together once, dear—do you remember—in the first days, when you promised yourself to me ? And now I know that in your heart you still care for me. You said so. Say you will come—say you will trust me—you will start to-morrow. If you can't come so soon I will wait, wait till you can come," he added, and she felt the trembling touch of his hands on hers, and his breath beating on her face.

"Don't, please," and she pushed back his hands. "Some one might see."

"What does it matter, my darling ? We are going to belong to one another for always. I am going to wait for you, darling—to be your slave—to give up every moment of my life to you . . . It's the thought of you that's made me live, dear.

. . . You brought me back to life, that day you came . . . I've thought of nothing but you since. I've been arranging it all——"

"It's impossible," she interrupted.

"No, dear, it's not impossible," he pleaded.

"You've resigned your living—left the Church?" she asked incredulously.

"Yes, everything," he answered proudly.

"And all because you cared so for me?"

"I can't begin to live again without you. I would suffer eternal punishment gladly to win you . . . You will trust yourself to me, darling; say you will trust me."

"Of course, Alec, I trust you. But you've no right to——"

"Oh! because you're married, and it's a sin, and I'm a clergyman. But I'm a man first. And for you I've given it all up—everything. You don't understand my love for you."

"Yes, yes, I do," she answered quickly, alarmed by the earnestness of his passion, yet remembering vaguely that she had read of such things in books.

"You will come to-morrow, darling—you will have trust in me?"

"You are mad, Alec. You don't know what you are saying. It would be absurd."

"It's because you don't understand how I love you, that you say that," he broke out fiercely. "You can't understand—you can't understand."

"Yes, I can," she protested, instinctively eager to vie with his display of emotion.

"Then say you will come—promise it, promise it," he cried ; and his features were all distorted by suspense.

But at this climax of his insistence, she lost consciousness of her own attitude. She seemed suddenly to see all that clumsiness which had made her refuse him before.

"It's altogether ridiculous," she answered shortly.

He recoiled from her : he seemed to stiffen a little all over ; and she felt rising impatience at his grotesque denseness in persisting.

"You say it's altogether ridiculous?" he repeated after her slowly.

"Yes, of course it's ridiculous," she repeated with uneasy emphasis. "I'm very sorry you should mind—feel it so—but it isn't my fault."

"Why did you say then that before God you loved me, when you came that day?" he burst out with concentrated bitterness.

"Because I thought you were dying." The bald statement of the truth sprang to her lips—a spontaneous, irresistible betrayal.

"I see—I see," he muttered. His hands clenched till the knuckles showed white.

"I'm very sorry," she added lamely. Her tone was gentler, for his dumb suffering moved her sensibilities. In her agitation, the crudity of her avowal had slipped her notice.

"That's no use," he answered wearily.

"Alec, don't be angry with me. Can't we be friends? Don't you see yourself now that it was

mad, absurd?" she argued, eager to reinstate herself in his eyes. Then, as he made no answer, "Let us be friends, Alec, and you will go back to Scarsdale, when you are well and strong. You will give up nothing for my sake. I should not wish that, you know, Alec."

"Yes," he assented mechanically, "I shall go back."

"I shall always think of this morning," she continued, growing sentimentally remorseful as the sensation of rising relief pervaded her. "And you will soon forget all about it," she added, with a cheeriness of tone that rang false; and paused, awaiting his answer.

"And I shall forget all about it," he repeated after her.

To mask her disappointment, she assumed a silly, nervous gaiety.

"And I shall keep it quite secret that you were so naughty as to ask me to run away with you. I sha'n't even tell Jim."

He nodded stupidly.

With a thin, empty smile on her face, she was debating how best to part with him, when, of a sudden, he rose, and, without a word, walked out of the room.

He strode away across the lawn, and, as she watched his retreating figure, she felt for him a shallow compassion, not unmingled with contempt.

MODERN MELODRAMA

THE pink shade of a single lamp supplied an air of subdued mystery ; the fire burned red and still ; in place of door and windows hung curtains, obscure, formless ; the furniture, dainty, but sparse, stood detached and incoördinate like the furniture of a stage-scene ; the atmosphere was heavy with heat, and a scent of stale tobacco ; some cut flowers, half-withered, tissue-paper still wrapping their stalks, lay on a gilt, cane-bottomed chair.

“ Will you give me a sheet of paper, please ? ”

He had crossed the room, to seat himself before the principal table. He wore a fur-lined overcoat, and he was tall, and broad, and bald ; a sleek face, made grave by gold-rimmed spectacles.

The other man was in evening dress ; his back leaning against the mantelpiece, his hands in his pockets : he was moodily scraping the hearthrug with his toe. Clean-shaved ; stolid and coarsely regular features ; black, shiny hair, flattened on to his head ; undersized eyes, moist and glistening ; the tint of his face uniform, the tint of discoloured ivory ; he looked a man who ate well and lived hard.

"Certainly, sir, certainly," and he started to hurry about the room.

"Daisy," he exclaimed roughly, a moment later, "where the deuce do you keep the note-paper?"

"I don't know if there is any, but the girl always has some." She spoke in a slow tone—insolent and fatigued.

A couple of bed-pillows were supporting her head, and a scarlet plush cloak, trimmed with white down, was covering her feet, as she lay curled on the sofa. The fire-light glinted on the metallic gold of her hair, which clashed with the black of her eyebrows; and the full, blue eyes, wide-set, contradicted the hard line of her vivid-red lips. She drummed her fingers on the sofa-edge, nervously.

"Never mind," said the bald man shortly, producing a note-book from his breast-pocket, and tearing a leaf from it.

He wrote, and the other two stayed silent; the man returned to the hearthrug, lifting his coat-tails under his arms; the girl went on drumming the sofa-edge.

"There," sliding back his chair, and looking from the one to the other, evidently uncertain which of the two he should address. "Here is the prescription. Get it made up to-night, a table-spoonful at a time, in a wine-glassful of water at lunch-time, at dinner-time and before going to bed. Go on with the port wine twice a day, and" (to the girl deliberately and distinctly) "you *must*

keep quite quiet ; avoid all sort of excitement—that is extremely important. Of course you must on no account go out at night. Go to bed early, take regular meals, and keep always warm.”

“I say,” broke in the girl, “tell us, it isn’t bad—dangerous, I mean?”

“Dangerous!—no, not if you do what I tell you.”

He glanced at his watch, and rose, buttoning his coat.

“Good-evening,” he said gravely.

At first she paid no heed ; she was vacantly staring before her : then, suddenly conscious that he was waiting, she looked up at him.

“Good-night, doctor.”

She held out her hand, and he took it.

“I’ll get all right, won’t I?” she asked, still looking up at him.

“All right—of course you will—of course. But remember you must do what I tell you.”

The other man handed him his hat and umbrella, opened the door for him, and it closed behind them.

* * * * *

The girl remained quiet, sharply blinking her eyes, her whole expression eager, intense.

A murmur of voices, a muffled tread of footsteps descending the stairs—the gentle shutting of a door—stillness.

She raised herself on her elbow, listening ; the cloak slipped noiselessly to the floor. Quickly

her arm shot out to the bell-rope: she pulled it violently; waited, expectant; and pulled again.

A slatternly figure appeared—a woman of middle age—her arms, bared to the elbows, smeared with dirt; a grimy apron over her knees.

“What’s up?—I was smashin’ coal,” she explained.

“Come here,” hoarsely whispered the girl—“here—no—nearer—quite close. Where’s he gone?”

“Gone? ’oo?”

“That man that was here.”

“I s’ppose ’ee’s in the down-stairs room. I ain’t ’eard the front door slam.”

“And Dick, where’s he?”

“They’re both in there together, I s’ppose.”

“I want you to go down—quietly—without making a noise—listen at the door—come up, and tell me what they’re saying.”

“What? Down there?” jerking her thumb over her shoulder.

“Yes, of course—at once,” answered the girl, impatiently.

“And if they catches me—a nice fool I looks. No, I’m jest blowed if I do!” she concluded. “Whatever’s up?”

“You must,” the girl broke out excitedly. “I tell you, you must.”

“Must—must—an’ if I do, what am I goin’ to get out of it?” She paused, reflecting; then added: “Look ’ere—I tell yer what—I’ll do it for half a quid, there!”

"Yes—yes—all right—only make haste."

"An' 'ow d' I know as I'll git it?" she objected doggedly. "It's a jolly risk, yer know."

The girl sprang up, flushed and feverish.

"Quick—or he'll be gone. I don't know where it is—but you shall have it—I promise—quick—please go—quick."

The other hesitated, her lips pressed together; turned, and went out.

And the girl, catching at her breath, clutched a chair.

* * * * *

A flame flickered up in the fire, buzzing spasmodically. A creak outside. She had come up. But the curtains did not move. Why didn't she come in? She was going past. The girl hastened across the room, the intensity of the impulse lending her strength.

"Come—come in," she gasped. "Quick—I'm slipping."

She struck at the wall; but with the flat of her hand, for there was no grip. The woman bursting in, caught her, and led her back to the sofa.

"There, there, dearie," tucking the cloak round her feet. "Lift up the piller, my 'ands are that mucky. Will yer 'ave anythin'?"

She shook her head. "It's gone," she muttered. "Now—tell me."

"Tell yer?—tell yer what? Why—why—there ain't jest nothin' to tell yer."

"What were they saying? Quick."

"I didn't 'ear nothin'. They was talkin' about some ballet-woman."

The girl began to cry, feebly, helplessly, like a child in pain.

"You might tell me, Liz. You might tell me. I've been a good sort to you."

"That yer 'ave. I knows yer 'ave, dearie. There, there, don't yer take on like that. Yer'll only make yerself bad again."

"Tell me—tell me," she wailed. "I've been a good sort to you, Liz."

"Well, they wasn't talkin' of no ballet-woman—that's straight," the woman blurted out savagely.

"What did he say?—tell me." Her voice was weaker now.

"I can't tell yer—don't yer ask me—for God's sake, don't yer ask me."

With a low crooning the girl cried again.

"Oh! for God's sake, don't yer take on like that—it's awful—I can't stand it. There, dearie, stop that cryin' an' I'll tell yer—I will indeed. It was jest this way—I slips my shoes off, an' I goes down as careful—jest as careful as a cat—an' when I gets to the door I crouches myself down, listenin' as 'ard as ever I could. The first thing as I 'ears was Mr. Dick speakin' thick-like—like as if 'ee'd bin drinkin'—an' t'other chap 'ee says somethin' about lungs, using some long word—I missed that—there was a van or somethin' rackettin' on the road. Then 'ee says 'gallopin', gallopin', jest like as if 'ee was talkin' of a 'orse. An' Mr. Dick, 'ee

says, 'ain't there no chance—no'ow?' and 'ee give a sort of a grunt. I was awful sorry for 'im, that I was, 'ee must 'ave been crool bad, 'ee's mostly so quiet-like, ain't 'ee? An', in a minute, 'ee sort o' groans out somethin', an' t'other chap 'ee answer 'im quite cool-like, that 'ee don't properly know: but, anyways, it 'ud be over afore the end of February. There, I've done it. Oh! dearie, it's awful, awful, that's jest what it is. An' I 'ad no intention to tell yer—not a blessed word—that I didn't—may God strike me blind if I did! Some'ow it all come out, seein' yer chokin' that 'ard an' feelin' at the wall there. Yer 'ad no right to ask me to do it—'ow was I to know 'ee was a doctor?"

She put the two corners of her apron to her eyes, gurgling loudly.

"Look 'ere, don't yer b'lieve a word of it—I don't—I tell yer they're a 'umbuggin' lot, them doctors, all together. I know it. Yer take my word for that—yer'll git all right again. Yer'll be as well as I am, afore yer've done—Oh, Lord!—it's jest awful—I feel that upset—I'd like to cut my tongue out, for 'avin' told yer—but I jest couldn't 'elp myself." She was retreating towards the door, wiping her eyes, and snorting out loud sobs—"An' don't yer offer me that half-quid—I couldn't take it of yer—that I couldn't."

* * * * *

She shivered, sat up, and dragged the cloak tight

round her shoulders. In her desire to get warm she forgot what had happened. She extended the palms of her hands towards the grate: the heat was delicious. A smoking lump of coal clattered on to the fender: she lifted the tongs, but the sickening remembrance arrested her. The things in the room were receding, dancing round: the fire was growing taller and taller. The woollen scarf chafed her skin: she wrenched it off. Then hope, keen and bitter, shot up, hurting her. "How could he know? Of course he couldn't know. She'd been a lot better this last fortnight—the other doctor said so—she didn't believe it—she didn't care—— Anyway, it would be over before the end of February!"

Suddenly the crooning wail started again: next, spasms of weeping, harsh and gasping.

By-and-bye she understood that she was crying noisily, and that she was alone in the room: like a light in a wind, the sobbing fit ceased.

"Let me live—let me live—I'll be straight—I'll go to church—I'll do anything! Take it away—it hurts—I can't bear it!"

Once more the sound of her own voice in the empty room calmed her. But the tension of emotion slackened, only to tighten again: immediately she was jeering at herself. What was she wasting her breath for? What had Jesus ever done for her? She'd had her fling, and it was no thanks to Him.

"*Dy-sy—Dy-sy——*"

From the street below, boisterous and loud, the refrain came up. And, as the footsteps tramped away, the words reached her once more, indistinct in the distance :

“ ‘I’m jest cry-zy, all for the love o’ you.’ ”

She felt frightened. It was like a thing in a play. It was as if some one was there, in the room—hiding—watching her.

Then a coughing fit started, racking her. In the middle, she struggled to cry for help ; she thought she was going to suffocate.

Afterwards she sank back, limp, tired, and sleepy.

The end of February—she was going to die—it was important, exciting—what would it be like ? Everybody else died. Midge had died in the summer—but that was worry and going the pace. And they said that Annie Evans was going off too. Damn it ! she wasn’t going to be chicken-hearted. She’d face it. She had had a jolly time. She’d be game till the end. Hell-fire—that was all stuff and nonsense—she knew that. It would be just nothing—like a sleep. Not even painful : she’d be just shut down in a coffin, and she wouldn’t know that they were doing it. Ah ! but they might do it before she was quite dead ! It had happened sometimes. And she wouldn’t be able to get out. The lid would be nailed, and there would be earth on the top. And if she called no one would hear.

Ugh ! what a fit of the blues she was getting !

It was beastly, being alone. Why the devil didn't Dick come back?

That noise! What was that?

Bah! only some one in the street. What a fool she was!

She winced again as the fierce feeling of revolt swept through her, the wild longing to fight. It was damned rough—four months! A year, six months even, was a long time. The pain grew acute, different from anything she had felt before,

“Good Lord! what am I maundering on about? Four months—I'll go out with a fizzle like a fire-work. Why the devil doesn't Dick come?—or Liz—or somebody? What do they leave me alone like this for?”

She dragged at the bell-rope.

* * * * *

He came in, white and blear-eyed.

“Whatever have you been doing all this time?” she began angrily.

“I've been chatting with the doctor.” He was pretending to read a newspaper: there was something funny about his voice.

“It's ripping. He says you'll soon be fit again, as long as you don't get colds, or that sort of thing. Yes, he says you'll soon be fit again”—a quick, crackling noise—he had gripped the newspaper in his fist.

She looked at him, surprised, in spite of herself. She would never have thought he'd have done it

like that. He was a good sort, after all. But—she didn't know why—she broke out furiously :

"You infernal liar!—I know. I shall be done for by the end of February—ha ! ha !"

Seizing a vase of flowers, she flung it into the grate. The crash and the shrivelling of the leaves in the flames brought her an instant's relief. Then she said quietly :

"There—I've made an idiot of myself; but" (weakly) "I didn't know—I didn't know—I thought it was different."

He hesitated, embarrassed by his own emotion. Presently he went up to her and put his hands round her cheeks.

"No," she said, "that's no good, I don't want that. Get me something to drink. I feel bad."

He hurried to the cupboard and fumbled with the cork of a champagne bottle. It flew out with a bang. She started violently.

"You clumsy fool!" she exclaimed.

She drank off the wine at a gulp.

"Daisy," he began.

She was staring stonily at the empty glass.

"Daisy," he repeated.

She tapped her toe against the fender-rail.

At this sign, he went on—

"How did you know?"

"I sent Liz to listen," she answered mechanically.

He looked about him, helpless.

"I think I'll smoke," he said feebly.

She made no answer.

"Here, put the glass down," she said.

He obeyed.

He lit a cigarette over the lamp, sat down opposite her, puffing dense clouds of smoke.

And, for a long while, neither spoke.

"Is that doctor a good man?"

"I don't know. People say so," he answered.

YEW-TREES AND PEACOCKS

A SUMMER stillness, redolent of stately leisure, floated over all things. An indolent assemblage of huge clouds, milk-white and swelling, filled the sky; portly, sober-toned oaks stood grouped at decorous intervals across the broad, undulating park; and in the distance grazed a herd of deer—a hesitating streak of delicate brown. The lawn lay spread faultlessly as a costly carpet: beyond its further edge rose a sudden blaze of pompous colour—purple sweet-william, giant fox-gloves and holly-oakes, bed upon bed of damask roses, dying in gorgeous disorder—a tangle of old-world flowers, lavender, dull gold, and faded magenta, clambering and twining, overhanging the grass in drooping, crowding clusters. And the great, rectangular house, built of rich-red sandstone, and surmounted by the effigy of a monstrous lion, seemed, with its luxurious windows, and massive colonnade emphasizing the entrance, by reason of its spacious solidity, at once to complete and to justify the opulent dignity of the landscape.

A pair of peacocks, insolently gaudy, were strutting about the grass; two boarhounds were gam-

bolting over the trim gravel sweep: presently a footman came out of the house, carrying a silver tray loaded with afternoon tea-things, which he proceeded to arrange on a table already laid beneath the shadow of the two twin yew-trees.

And then, from behind the border of tall flowers, she appeared. The boarhounds ceased their clumsy play, and galloped to meet her. And she came across the lawn with a leisurely and consummate grace, dreamily swinging by its ribands a large-brimmed garden-hat.

"Has Colonel Hallam come?" she asked.

"Yes, my lady; he's with his lordship in the library," the man answered.

"Will you tell them, please, that tea is ready?"

She sat down in a low basket-chair by the tea-table; her fine, white hand toyed listlessly with her *châtelaine*; her lips parted, and through her half-closed eyelids she looked out across the park, dreamily—dreamily as in an old portrait you sometimes catch a woman's wandering gaze. Her face was still reminiscent of that sumptuous beauty which it had once possessed; but time had faded its former richness to an exquisite paleness, a subtle harmony of tired colour. Her dress, the colour of old-gold, drifted in clinging folds on to the grass, and the sunlight played gently with the crispness of her hair, vaguely powdered with grey, yet artlessly abundant as a young girl's. And from the fragility of her worn loveliness, there emanated an air of delicate, subdued sadness, as if the sensi-

tive beauty of her soul had constrained her to long, intimate renouncements, as if she had elected to live isolated from the crudity of the world.

Yet, presently, as the boarhounds started to chase one another across the lawn, the far-away look left her eyes, and a faint smile of amusement flickered about her mouth.

The two men for whom she was waiting came out of the house. As they strolled towards her, across the gravel, the elder of the two, Lord Sheire, said hurriedly—

“This will be a great blow to Constance, Hallam.”

“I will tell her about it after tea,” the other answered quietly.

Lady Sheire gave her hand to Colonel Hallam with an artless simplicity, which might have seemed studied had they not been old friends. And the two men sat down beneath the yew-trees.

They talked of the English summer ; Lord Sheire hinting at the quality of the hay-crop ; Hallam grumbling good-humouredly over the jaded dustiness of London, while Constance smiled vaguely as she poured out the tea.

Lord Sheire's appearance at once suggested that conventional comeliness, that sleek, trim-whiskered middle-age, so frequent in certain old-fashioned London clubs. Every detail of his person—the sparse, silvery hair, carefully parted ; the unobtrusive, town-made country clothes ; the dapper, Russia leather boots ; the bland lethargy of ex-

pression ; the trivial precision of voice—all betokened a lengthy routine of convenient and gentlemanly ease.

Hallam sat with his legs crossed, stroking his coarse-grained, iron-grey moustache. At a first glance, perhaps, he seemed physically unremarkable ; but his open face, typical, soldierly ; rugged, yet suffused with ascetic refinement, soon seemed to reveal a convincing personality ; reticent, sure of itself ; quick of resolve, strong in quiet purpose ; drilled to discipline, accustomed to command.

Just now, while he chatted to Constance of the Italian opera season, alluding vigorously to his antipathy against the uncouthness of Wagner, his present preoccupation was almost imperceptible. Yet she had already detected it ; her husband's tentative and persevering participation in the topic had surprised her.

So she encouraged the conversation thoughtfully, discreetly glancing from the one to the other, giving free play to her prompt, womanly instincts.

By-and-bye she let the talk languish ; and Hallam began familiarly to coax the peacocks with crumbs of cake.

Lord Sheire rose.

"I have two or three letters to write before dinner," he began diffidently. "You'll excuse me, Hallam, I know. Constance will look after you."

And he turned abruptly towards the house.

Hallam continued to coax the peacocks ; but his simulation of indifference grew all at once mala-

droit. And Constance sat watching him, and wondering. After a while he seemed to become suddenly conscious of her silence ; for he emptied his palm of the crumbs hastily.

"What gorgeous creatures they are!" he remarked, half-apologetically.

She nodded gravely, holding his gaze in hers, while a quick, apprehensive smile flitted across her face.

So accustomed were they, in their intimacy, to the reposeful enjoyment of their familiar friendship, that his embarrassment disturbed her strangely ; from her habit of him, she divined that it sprang from no trivial cause.

"What is it, Colonel Hallam?" she asked abruptly. Her tremulousness was obvious, like the tremulousness of an actress on the stage ; but with her it was a simple expression of impulsive sincerity, amply warranted by her knowledge of him.

"Cathcart is invalided home," he answered.

"Well?" she exclaimed anxiously. The significance of his words had flashed across her mind ; but, for the moment, she had not the courage to inflict the pain upon herself. So she waited for him to continue.

"I have been asked to succeed him."

She winced, a little proudly ; and lifting her châtelaine, fingered it slowly. She was thinking of all that this meant to him, not of all that it would mean to her. And that was very character-

istic of her. That old longing of his for active service, disappointed during so many years ; and now, of a sudden, unexpectedly granted—granted together with great responsibilities, with great chances of distinction ; granted now that he was already on the return of life. *He* was thinking of them too, she guessed—of those responsibilities, of those chances of distinction ; thinking of them with an almost boyish quickening of pulse, that carried him back to the days when he was a subaltern ; longing for the thrill of command, after the protracted monotony of official routine, against which, of late, he had discovered himself impatiently chafing. . . .

“ When do you start ? ” she asked.

“ To-morrow night.”

“ But you said that Colonel Kenneth was to be appointed,” she resisted weakly.

“ I intimated that I would be glad to go.” He spoke almost inaudibly. The admission—it almost amounted to a confession—cost him no slight effort ; but he made it loyally.

And then, all at once, she understood the significance of the moment. It was good-bye between them. . . .

. . . . And he had done this himself, chosen of his own wish to cut himself adrift from the old ties, to begin life again, out there in the Far East, in a strange land, amid strange faces. Her glance fell on his grey hair, and on his worn, white face : she wondered hurriedly if she had comprehended him

aright ; and a tragic admiration for him welled up in her heart.

"Then it is good-bye," she stammered.

He sent her a sudden, appealing look, a look of pleading pain, so foreign to his face that she was scared, as at some strange apparition. But she did not misunderstand him ; only felt that many things—the common incidents, the trivial interests, that marked the flow of her life—were all drifting past her, that, suddenly, for her, they had become devoid of sense. And she felt too, that he had done what was right, because he could not have known how she wanted to keep him, how his friendship had come to fill her life. So before what seemed to her the fatalistic twisting of destiny, she made meekly ready to bow in resignation. . . . *He* was troubled now ; and she was grieved for him, impatient to reassure him, lest he should divine the loneliness that lay ahead of her.

"Tell me," she began bravely, "about your life out there—what it will be like ?"

"There will be marching, probably some fighting—but most of all organizing of native troops . . . there will be plenty of emergencies to cope with out there. You remember our talk about emergencies . . . it was just three weeks ago. . . . I never thought to get this chance then."

"You will do well out there," she continued.

"Yes," he answered steadily, stroking the boarhound's head meditatively.

She was grateful to him for that.

"I want you so to do well," she said impulsively.

He looked up at her again, but he did not smile.

"I did not think it would be so hard to go—to part with old friends—with Sheire, and with you."

"But it will only be for a while."

"Yes," he repeated after her dully, "it will only be for a while."

* * * * *

"I want you to let me talk to you about something—now that I am going," he began with a grave hesitation—a hesitation that was prompted less by irresolution than by the sensibility of intuitive tact.

And she seemed in no way surprised, only listlessly expectant.

"You remember here under these yew-trees it was fifteen years ago yesterday. . . . It was just such an afternoon as this. . . ."

She was looking at him absently, through her half-closed eyelids.

"We chose the better part then."

She assented dreamily.

"But you have been everything to me," he continued. "You know that, I think."

"Have I?" she queried vaguely.

"Because I am going, you will not let our friendship fade?"

He was scanning her steadfastly now. Her eyes filled with tears, slowly; but they did not shrink

from his. She was quite unconscious of her emotion.

And he said eagerly—

“Would it help you if I were to stay? . . . It is not too late.”

She stretched her hand towards him impulsively. He took it in simple reverence, of a sudden comprehending her.

“No . . . it is too late . . . you must go. . . . I want you to go . . . only promise me that you will come back.”

“Yes,” he said steadily, “I shall come back.”

And he felt instinctively, with a fierce, unreasoning bitterness, that there was nothing more to be said.

Lord Sheire came across the lawn.

“Will you take a turn with me, Hallam, before dinner?”

And the two men sauntered away together, arm in arm.

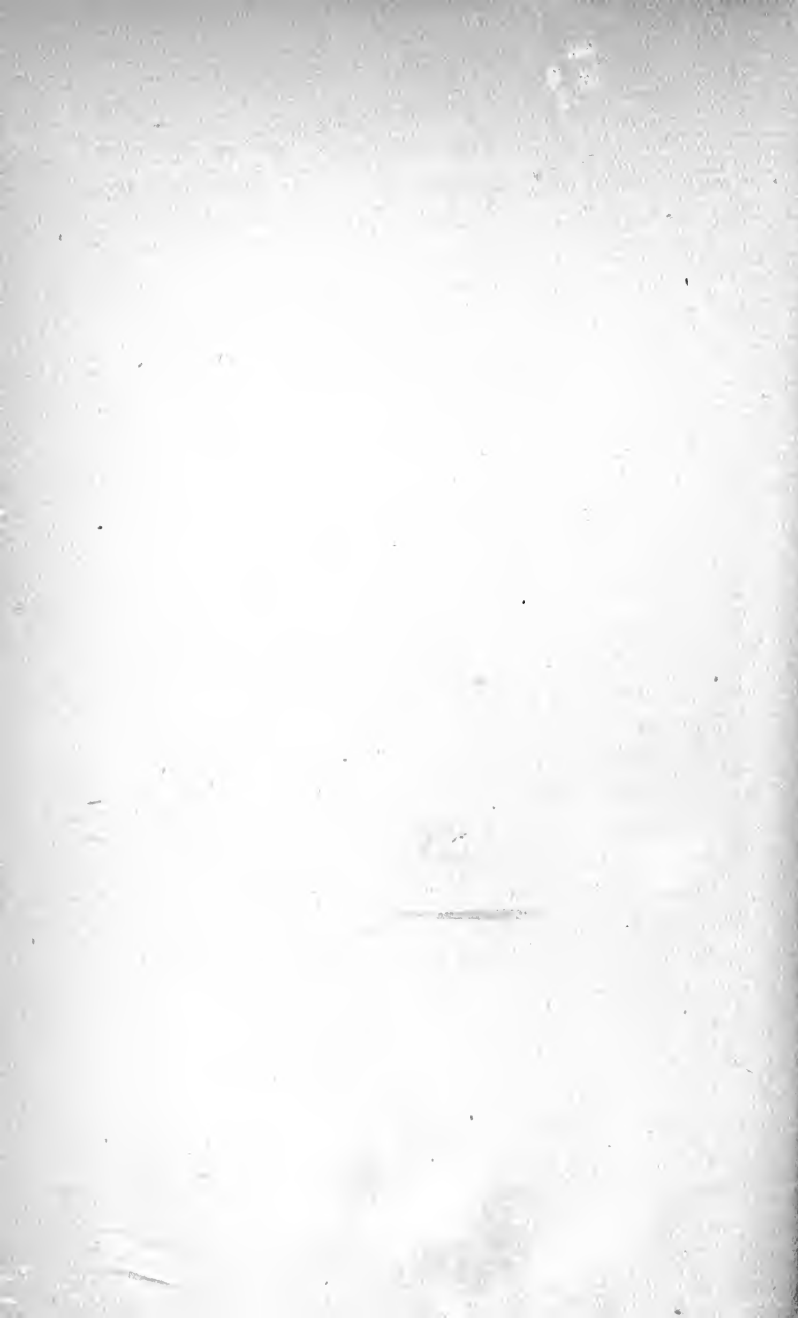
* * * * *

Behind the oaks the red sun dropped; creeping up from the west, a tiny breeze rustled past, and was gone, and the glare of the afternoon gave place to the soft cool of evening. The snow-capped cloud-mountains glowed pink; slowly the hues deepened, pouring themselves in a gorgeous flood over the sky—cornelian, saffron, gold—gradually, in flawless transition, cooling to thin yellow, and far away, across the park, dusky and indefinite, to chilly grey.

And there, where the furnace flared fiercest, straight across its pulsing heart, twisted and shrivelled, stiffened as if its life had been taken from it in the climax of its agony, lay the black, burnt carcase of a tortured cloud. The foliage of the yew-trees turned dark as pitch ; from across the great park, all flushed, floated a faint lowing of cattle. And then there was no more sound, for the day was dead. . . .

Constance rose, shivering a little, and moved across the lawn towards the house.

A Set of
Village Tales



LISA-LA-FOLLE

I

UP on the top of the hill she lived alone, in the shed with the peaked roof. No one could tell you how old she was; and only old Cauhapé knew how long she had been there. Old Cauhapé's legs were paralyzed, and when the sun shone, he used to sit, wrapped in sacking, before the *débit de tabac* which his little great-niece kept for him. And if you could but get him to talk, he would narrate to you, in his stumbling, jerky fashion, how many, many years ago, when Lisa-la-folle was black-haired, and handsome, and devilish proud, the soldiers had come one day to gallop about the valley, and how another day they were all gone back to Paris, they and the officers, in their great plumed hats, and red cloaks reaching below the heels, and Lisa-la-folle with them.

It was a glamorous, sinful life she had led there, with carriages and horses and servants, and a gorgeous mansion, where the nobles played with dice, and sang ribald songs all the night long, till the candles sputtered low in their sockets—at least,

so old Cauhapé had heard tell. And many a shameful deed was done in that gorgeous mansion of hers—deeds over which old Cauhapé wagged his head solemnly.

Then, one sweltering Sunday afternoon, she had come back. Everywhere the land was cracking with thirst; for there had fallen no rain through the summer, old Cauhapé remembered.

All the village was going in to vespers as she tottered past the church door, white-haired, bare-footed, and ragged, grimed with much travelling, chattering and laughing to herself the while about things which had no sense. And some of the lads had jeered at her, and one or two had thrown stones, and the young women had run screaming into the church. But she took no notice of any one: just went by, chattering and laughing to herself. (All the way from Paris she had come so; nearly a thousand kilometres Monsieur le curé had reckoned it.)

That evening the rain had come—a noisy, battering rain, and Monsieur le curé had found her in the lane behind his house, sitting drenched to the skin, still laughing to herself at her own thoughts. And Monsieur le curé had taken her inside, and given her food and wine, and had talked to her softly in good French—she had forgotten the language of the *pays*—and by-and-bye she grew to be quiet and reasonable, and used to work for Monsieur le curé, hoeing and digging in his garden. And when Monsieur le curé died,

out of charity, they set her to mend the roads ; for she was strong and a brave worker, and cared nothing for wind or rain. Four kilometres of the road to Hagetmau they allotted her, between the crucifix and the thirteenth milestone ; and for thirty-eight years she had tended those four kilometres of road, in rain, sunshine, and storm, and had never missed a day. And she had gone to live, up on the hill, in the shed with the peaked roof ; and in the evenings the Annous, who were neighbours, could see her digging her bit of garden, and hanging her rags to dry before the door.

But she was still mad, old Cauhapé asserted ; for she had never again remembered the language of the *pays* ; but always spoke French—the strange French of the people of Paris, with words that even Monsieur le curé did not know ; and sometimes, still, as you passed along the road, you might hear her laughing and chattering to herself, just as she had done that Sunday afternoon, when she had first come back to the village.

All the same she was a brave worker, and never did harm to any one, and so now no one paid much heed to her. Only she was getting broken at last, and the inspector had grumbled, saying that her time was almost done.

II

Every morning at half-past seven, and every evening at half-past six, Lisa-la-folle, carrying her big blue umbrella and bundle of provisions, used to pass my gate. For a whole fortnight after my talk with old Cauhapé, I never missed wishing her good-morning and good-night. At first she would pretend not to hear me ; by-and-bye she took to sending me a quick, suspicious glance, like the start of a frightened animal ; last of all, she gave me a mumbling answer.

A little while later, as I rode by her at work, I stopped to speak to her. She stepped forward, laid her hand on the mare's bridle, and motioned me to dismount. I did as she bid me, and we sat down side by side on a grass-grown mud-heap.

"You are a stranger : you are not of the country," she said. "You are young, and you have a beautiful wife. Stay a moment, and I will tell you something, something that I have never told to any of them," and she pointed up the road towards the village. "You shall hear it, and then you can tell it to the people of the land from which you come.

"You do not know the great sun. No, how can you ? You are young, and I am old. I have lived with him ; I have waited on him many a long, long

year. I know him ; I know the great sun ; I have talked with him : when he is glad and rollicking ; when he is sulky and shuts his face ; when he is angry and rages over the heavens ; when he is sorrowful and drips blood-red tears on to the earth. Yes, I have talked with him ; in the old time, before the great sun's life was all changed ; in the old time, when he and the moon were happy all the day's length, wandering about the cloud-mountains ; and at night-fall they slept side by side beneath the shadow of the earth. The moon loved him with a clinging love—a love surpassing the deepest love of woman—a love that you cannot understand, and she was ever joyous and rosy, and they were never apart, neither day nor night. Then, one hot summer evening, the spirit of wantonness clipped the moon, and she slipped from the great sun as he slept, and did him a foul wrong. And in the morning he awoke, full of red wrath to find the moon gone from his side, and that day he put her away from him, for ever and ever.

“And now, while the great sun sleeps, down there, beneath the shadow of the earth, the moon walks the heavens alone, wan and thin and wasted, and when he returns with the day, she flees to hide her white face for shame.”

THE WHITE MAIZE

OLD Cauhapé said it was the end of the world.

For eight days and eight nights the ceaseless hiss of the rain. During the day-time, neither sky nor sun, nor breath of wind—only the grey veil of mist, enshrouding all things. The nights were dark as pitch, and full of the hiss of the rain ; and from sunset to sunrise the frogs chanted their long, dismal mass.

On the eighth day of the rain, about six o'clock in the afternoon, I went out. A sickly glimmer of muddy light flickered from the west ; a breeze was shaking the drops from the trees ; the road was powdered with acacia-bloom, lying thick like sodden snow ; great pools of yellow water were in possession of the lanes ; and new-born streams, bubbling of their own importance, trickled, sleek and swollen, across the fields and under the hedges.

Eudore stood in his doorway : inside the house I could hear the clattering of Anna's sabots. He looked up at me, as I trudged towards him, across the spongy ox-bedding ; but he gave me no greeting, nor moved his hand to his béret, military-

wise, as was his habit. In an instant, it flashed upon me that some great trouble had come to Eudore, and I hesitated whether to go forward or to go back.

Eudore was young and brawny and obstinate : but, as I had reason to know, he had been hard put to it these last months. And the third baby was on its way.

I came close up to him ; but still he said nothing, just held his open palm towards me. In it lay a young maize-sprout, fresh-plucked.

I understood. My gaze met his, and there was the stolidness of despair in his dull face.

The maize had come up white.

We went inside without speaking, and Anna bustled about to make me welcome, and knelt on the hearth to blow up the fire. Marcellin, the little boy, lay on the floor, playing with a cockchafer. He had tied a thread to its hind legs, and was trying to persuade the creature to fly. But the cockchafer was lazy with the damp, and refused to do more than crawl. Whereupon Marcellin dumped his podgy fist on the floor, and threw the cockchafer, thread and all, into the yard.

Eudore took him by the hand, and the two went out to bring in the geese. And when they were gone there was an end of Anna's cheeriness. She began to grumble, pursing her dark-red lips, dilating her round, black eyes, scattering her words, as it were, all over the room.

It was while Eudore was with the regiment at

Mont-de-Monsan that he had courted her. She was a *bonne-à-tout-faire* in those days. And now that the luck was dead against Eudore, that every year things went worse and worse with them, and that most of the place was mortgaged to Etienne Mattou, the money-lender, she grumbled whenever she could find a listener, and when there was no one she emptied her heart to little Marcellin, concerning the dreariness of life in the country, the cursed greed of the land which devoured everything, and grudged even a tainted fruit, concerning the spitefulness of God in Heaven.

Then Eudore returned, and little Marcellin drove the young geese towards the fire, and Anna's grumbling ceased.

Eudore pulled the maize-sprout from his pocket, and turned it over once more in his hand, looking stolidly across at Anna. Then he threw it among the fizzling logs.

The maize had come up white. The fields were all dotted with thousands and thousands of rotten sprouts, and Eudore was altogether ruined.

At the Toussaint he was sold up, and the great tragedy of his life started to drag its course.

SAINT-PÉ

I

REGULARLY, three times a week, every Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday, he and his dog came to beg.

He was very tall and very gaunt, and his clothes were all plastered with quaint patches, and ravelled along the hems. But he was always scrupulously clean. His flowing grey beard was silky and well-combed, and the red skin of his hands glistened, as with much polishing. And his sabots, which were many sizes too large, were stuffed with clean straw ; and he always left them on the doorstep, and came into the house bare-footed.

He called himself Saint-Pé—why I could never discover—for one day he admitted to me that he had been baptized altogether differently. He and the curé, and the officier de santé and I represented the classes at Sallespisse ; but Saint-Pé alone *vivait en rentier*. For from sunrise to sunset he was idle ; he had not done a day's work since the war. He lived in a ramshackle, one-roomed, mud-floored building, from one corner of which at night, through

the broken tiles he could lie and watch the stars. But the house was his own property, and every Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday morning he shuffled out of it in his clumsy sabots to beg around the neighbourhood.

Saint-Pé's dog was named Pluton. Once upon a time he had been of the race of St. Hubert; and Saint-Pé when he learned my name hastened to recommend the animal to my special attention. Whatever Pluton had been once in the distant days of his youth, he was now but a wriggling collection of bones, encased in a worn-out skin. I never knew him venture to carry his tail otherwise than tight under his belly; and whenever I met him alone, or skulking along behind his master, he never failed to greet me with an interminable, complicated series of grovelling, Japanese-like obeisances.

And, as I have said, the two came to the house every Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday, and while Pluton sneaked off to rummage obsequiously for refuse in the scullery, Saint-Pé mumbled out the whole lamentation of his woes, as lugubriously, as elaborately, as if he were a complete stranger. Four sous per visit was my allowance to Saint-Pé; and when he had pocketed them somewhere amid those mysterious patches of his coat he would clump away down the drive, noisily praying to the Virgin for the future repose of my soul.

Eudore and Saint-Pé were neighbours, and Eudore hated Saint-Pé after his obstinate, uncom-

promising fashion, and never altogether forgave me for encouraging the old impostor. "C'est de la canaille," he would repeat sullenly, when, to tease him, I related Saint-Pé's doings, "c'est comme des *lagas*; ça vit sur les gens."

But if, in Eudore's opinion, Saint-Pé was a worthless parasite, Pluton was a cursed thief. One night Eudore had missed five of his young ducks, and he had shouted across the hedge to Saint-Pé that the very next time he would shoot that cur of his dead on the spot. At which threat Saint-Pé shrugged his bony shoulders, and Pluton retreated inside the house, grovelling more obsequiously than ever.

"Il est malin," Saint-Pé confided to me the next morning. "Il trouve . . . ce qu'il trouve—et ça ne paraît point—regardez." And, indeed, despite the five young ducks, Pluton looked more starved than before.

II

One Tuesday, about the time of the sowing of the maize, Saint-Pé never appeared, and on the Thursday I missed him again. So at sunset, when I had done my work, I strolled up to his house, wondering what could have happened to him. The door was open; a half-cut loaf of maize-bread stood on the table, but there was no sign of Saint-Pé. Then I heard the scraping of a spade. Saint-Pé was behind the house, digging.

He put down his spade and shuffled up to me. And he began to repeat the whole of his elaborate lamentation—he was miserable; he was poor; life was hard; he had no one to look after him; he appealed to good, charitable folks to help him in his old age; “and now,” he concluded, “my dog, the old Pluton, the only thing that the good God had left to me, my dog, my dog, he is dead.” He led me behind his house, and lifting his coat, all plastered with patches, uncovered poor Pluton’s corpse, with his tail stretched behind him, stark and straight, as I had never seen it while he lived. “Et maintenant,” said Saint-Pé proudly, pointing to the half-dug grave, “et maintenant, monsieur, je travaille.” And once more, from the very beginning, he went through his lamentation, con-

cluding with the appeal to the good, charitable folks to help him.

I asked him how it had happened. He jerked his head towards the hedge, beyond which stood Eudore's house. "It was this morning, at day-break. A shot—paf!" (And he imitated, dramatically, the gesture of shooting.) "And it was only one that he had taken—just one miserable little duck. Only one. I assure you, monsieur, he hadn't had time to take more than one." And for the third time he repeated his lamentation.

Eudore came out of his house, and, seeing us, strolled up to the hedge and looked over. Saint-Pé went back to his digging. Eudore stood silent for several minutes ; presently he said, half to himself—

"Ça faisait pitié de voir une bête affamée comme ça."

Then, turning to Saint-Pé, he called in patois—
"Stop a minute ; I will dig for you."

He pushed his way through a gap in the hedge, and taking the spade, dug out the grave. And when he had finished, Saint-Pé lifted the stiff carcass tenderly and placed it inside ; then shovelled the earth over it with his clumsy sabots.

ETIENNE MATTOU

I

IT was the fair at Amou. On the ox-market, under the plane-trees, a sea of blue bérets ; an incoherent waving of ox-goads ; hundreds of sleek, fawn-coloured backs and curved, bristling horns.

Etienne Mattou had been found murdered.

A boy from Baigts had just brought the news, as I drove into the town, and the murmur of it had started to run like wild-fire through the throng. For in those parts they all knew Etienne Mattou ; and so every one could feel an eager, personal interest in the crime.

The boy had soon related all he knew. The express from Toulouse pulled up, close to the level crossing which his mother kept. The *chef-de-train* and three other officials between them carried the body into his mother's house and laid it on the kitchen table. And the blood trickled all down their trousers, and reddened the cloth which they spread over the face. The *chef-de-train* went back to the train and walked along the foot-board, asking at every window for a

doctor, till at last a stout gentleman in a tall hat clambered down from a first-class carriage.

Then the gendarmes came, and the engine-driver, who related how he had seen something lying across the rails, but had not been able to stop the train in time. The stout gentleman explained that Etienne Mattou had been dead for some time before the wheels had crushed his head, and showed some wounds on his chest, which, he said, had been done with a knife. After which they all went away together, and the train from Toulouse steamed off again. And the gendarmes found from some papers in the dead man's pockets, and from the marking on his clothes, that he was Etienne Mattou, and the *maréchal des logis* said it was quite clear that he had been murdered in the night, and that the assassin had placed the body across the rails, that people might think it was the train that had done it.

"And Jeanne? She's in the market. I saw her just now, bargaining for some chickens. Some one must tell her."

But as the old man spoke, she came in sight, walking alone in the middle of the road, with a straggling, gaping crowd behind her. Up there in the fruit-market, she had heard the news, and she had come straight away like that, looking neither to the right nor to the left, with a wild, scared gaze in her dry eyes. She had taken it so strangely that the women were afraid of her, and no one had dared to speak to her.

"Some one must see to her," the old man muttered.

I went up to her, and said, pointing to the dog-cart—

"I will drive you, Jeanne. The mare is fresh."

"Thank you," she answered in a hard voice, keeping her gaze fixed on the ground before her.

We got into the cart together, and the peasants all crowded round to see us start, and the old man swore at the boys and drove them away.

"Will you go home, or to Baigts?" I asked when we had crossed the river.

"Home, if you please. Shall I have to recognize the body?"

"Yes," I answered.

I busied myself with driving the mare as fast as she would go. The road was crowded with flocks of sheep, droves of young horses, ox-carts filled with calves and pigs and poultry, peasant men and peasant women, all on their way to the fair. They stood aside as we rattled past, and several bid me good-morning. But none of them had as yet heard the news. A chilly breeze blew in our faces, and the day was draped with heavy folds of lowering clouds. Jeanne never spoke a word; she sat quite still, her hands folded loosely on her lap. Was it the stoniness of compressed anguish, or the stolidity of indifference?

I recalled Etienne's polled, conical-shaped skull, his furtive, sunken eyes, his thin, hooked nose, his

egg-coloured moustache and imperial; and now the engine-wheels had smashed it all hideously, and before that, in the dark of the night—I remembered how the lashing of the wind against the window-pane had awoken me—some one had set upon him savagely, and stabbed him again and again. . . . And Jeanne was beside me, dry-eyed and motionless. . . . There was something brutal about the silence of this drive. For the mere sake of speaking, I struggled to find some ordinary phrase of consolation, some good word for the dead man. But I could not; for Jeanne was aware that I had had cause to hate him, as much as any one in the country. So nothing passed between us; there was only the monotonous clatter of the mare's swinging trot.

A fierce haggler, a man of many wiles, a man of stubborn greed, a man without pity, a bully, an evil-natured cheat—Etienne Mattou had been all that. Ostensibly, he had carried on an extensive trade in ham-curing, buying the pigs from the peasants, and sending the meat to Bayonne and to Bordeaux; but he had a multitude of other occupations—he was a money-lender, a horse-dealer, a wine-merchant, a road-contractor, and a speculator in land. And many a tale of his ruthlessness in each of these capacities was told about the country.

Jeanne was yet young, and I had often wondered what her life must have been, in that dank, dilapidated château of theirs. People said that she had grown evil-hearted too, and that it was she who

had turned the cask-binder out into the road, because he had become slow and infirm.

The rain came before we reached the house—a listless, silently flowing rain. The sky descended like a low ceiling ; the breath of the breeze dropped, and a heavy odour of sodden soil came from the land.

“ You’ll get wet,” I said to Jeanne.

She gave me no answer.

. . . And all the past month Etienne had been busier than ever—he had sold everything—his lands, his ham-trade, his horses ; he had dismissed his men. The lease of the château was almost at an end. Etienne was going to retire. In another fortnight he would have been gone—back to the Tarn-et-Garonne, his own country—gone with all his ill-gotten riches.

That the vengeance of some poor devil whom he had out-witted—it must have been that, I thought—should have fallen upon him at that moment, seemed like an awful judgment of God.

We turned within the old stone gateway, all yellow with moss. Inside, as we drove noiselessly over the grass-grown drive, under the thick-leaved trees, the air tasted hot and rank. The house, every shutter closed and the stucco peeling from the walls, stood desolate, rotting, dead-looking.

Jeanne got down, mounted the flight of green, cracked steps, pulled a key from her pocket, and pushed open the great, creaking door. Then, suddenly remembering me, she turned and nodded curtly.

“Thank you !”

“No one has come,” I said. And, as she did not speak, I asked—“What are you going to do ?”

“I shall wait.” She still stood half inside the house.

“Can I do anything ?”

“No, nothing,” she interrupted. She went inside, and the door closed behind her with a heavy noise.

II

Since our strange drive together that drizzling April morning, I have never seen Jeanne again. And to this day the gendarmes have not discovered Etienne Mattou's murderer. Old Cauhapé, I remember, for a whole week, grew quite garrulous over the mysterious crime, propounded half-a-dozen theories concerning it, and came to the brutal conclusion that, after all, the rascal only got what he deserved. Jeanne lived on in the dilapidated château, she and an old serving-woman. She was richer than ever now; for Etienne's life had been insured for eighty thousand francs. And people began to speak of her more kindly, and reminded one another that her parents had forced her into marrying Etienne, because he was a man of great fortune.

III

Truth is stranger than fiction ; and so it proved in the matter of Etienne Mattou.

One night towards the end of the year, I was at Havre, awaiting the Southampton steamer. When I entered the Café du Port, a flaccid-faced man stood on the platform, chanting a comic song.

“ Brunes et blondes, brunes et blondes,
Les p'tites cocottes, les p'tites cocottes,”

went the refrain.

“ Une cannette de Strasbourg ! ” called a voice—a rasping, deep-toned voice—a voice that I knew. Those furtive, sunken eyes, that thin, hooked nose—where had I seen them before ? The man sat alone, smoking a cigarette, moodily contemplating his glass.

In a flash it came upon me. It was Etienne Mattou. He wore a beard, and a workman's blouse. But it was him—that trick of blinking his eyes, of pressing the ball of his thumb under his nose, as he meditated.

The resemblance was extraordinary, yet the thing was impossible ; Etienne had been dead nearly a year.

Fascinated, I watched the man. Presently he

began to drum his finger on the marble table. "Les pioupious d'Auvergne,"—I had heard Etienne drum that tune in Eudore's house, the day after the sale.

With an irresistible impulse, I rose and sat down opposite him. His drumming ceased at once, and he fixed his gaze on me, violently blinking his small, sunken eyes. I sat there, as if hypnotized, unable to take my eyes off him. The singer came and jingled his plate-full of coppers between us. I let him pass. I felt that to move would break the spell. Then a reckless longing to make the man speak, to hear that rasping, deep-pitched voice, seized me—

"Vous êtes ici depuis longtemps, monsieur ?" I began.

"Mais foutez-moi la paix. Je ne vous connais pas."

It was the voice—Etienne's voice. And all at once my courage came back.

"Pardon," I said, "mais vous me connaissez parfaitement. Vous vous appelez Etienne Mattou."

Yes, it was he. Under the eyes he had turned all white.

"Voulez-vous me laissez tranquille ?"

"I want to know why you are not dead ?" My heart was thumping with excitement ; I never heeded the grotesqueness of the question.

"You are mad, I think."

"What are you doing here ?"

He struck a match, and, as he steadied the

flame, while the sulphur sputtered, his hand shook, rattling the stud of his shirt-cuff.

"I work here. I am a porter on the quay."

"But you are Etienne Mattou. I know you perfectly well now."

He dropped the lighted match on the table, and, leaning across, said in a low voice—

"Come outside."

We went into the street.

"And Jeanne? Where is Jeanne?" he asked.

"Jeanne believes you are dead—murdered by the railway."

"Is she still there—in the country?"

"Yes; and you——?"

"And I——?"

"They suppose it was your body that was found by the railway. How was that?"

"I can't tell," he replied sullenly. Then added—"Are you staying long here?"

"No, I go to-night, at half-past eleven—to England, by the steamer."

We were walking along the quay: a few passers were hurrying by, and the water was licking the harbour-wall.

"You are starting without fail to-night then?"

"Yes, without fail."

"You must tell no one that you have seen me."

"Why?"

"Because I am going back there to-morrow—to see after Jeanne—to give her a little surprise."

The light from a café illuminated his face. We

had stopped, and he held out two fingers of his right hand.

“Good-night.”

I watched him walk rapidly away. Then I went on board.

Later in the night, as we were ploughing across the Channel, I remembered the look on his face as he had bid me good-bye, and I understood how it had all happened. Etienne had met some beggar in the dark, had changed clothes with him, killed him, and placed the body across the rails, so that it might never be recognized. Afterwards he had escaped to Havre, and had been waiting there for Jeanne to join him with the insurance-money. But Jeanne had never come.

IV

I do not think he ever returned to give Jeanne that little surprise. At least, no one out there ever saw him. Jeanne still lives in the country. She has made over all her money to the convent of the Sacré-cœur at Navarreux, and now she is a cloistered nun, and will never come out till the end of her days.

THE LITTLE PRIEST

THE new curé had come. It was the event of the week at Sallespisse. So, on the Sunday morning, I called for Eudore and Anna, and we all three trudged up the hill together to matins. Outside the white-washed church they were all assembled, Gaston Lalanne and his sister-in-law Marthe, Beyris the baker, Dutihl the blacksmith, old Marcel Seris, with his bent back and rosy, infantile face, Saint-Pé and the rest, and a giggling group of girls.

Presently little Maria, old Cauhapé's great-niece, came running towards me down the village street.

"Monsieur," she cried breathlessly, "mon oncle vous souhaite le bonjour." It was the old man's way of intimating that he wished me to come to hear him chatter.

I found him sitting as usual, full in the morning sun, with his useless legs swathed in sacking, and I perceived at once that his humour, though garrulous, was not unruffled.

"What are you doing up here so early?" he asked sharply.

"I came to see the new curé," I answered.

"Why should you climb the hill just to look at the curé?" he retorted. "How can that possibly interest you? I have seen him, and I can tell you that he is just the same as any other priest."

I laughed. There were moments when old Cauhapé's speech was very dictatorial, and now he was exasperated against all this commotion in which he was not concerned.

"Vous êtes trop intransigent, Cauhapé," I said. "Les curés font beaucoup de bien."

"Parbleu! c'est leur métier," he replied sullenly in patois. "Sit down; light your cigarette; and let us talk."

"But," I remonstrated, "look, they are all going into church."

"I tell you he is just the same as all the rest," the old man objected testily. "You have the curiosity of a woman, I think, sometimes. Come now, will you not sit and stay?"

Maria brought me a chair from inside, and the old man continued—

"It is a strange whim that makes you come to live amongst us here. We were discussing it, Dutihl, Beyris, and I, yesterday evening. We like you, but especially we like your madame. She is good and true, and has a brave heart—one can see that at once in the glance of her eyes. And we were hoping that you would be with us a

long while yet, and come back every spring-time. But Beyris thought you must be lonely here, away from your friends; and it is a trouble to Dutihl that you will always send your little mares in to the smithy at Orthez."

Old Cauhapé stopped, looking up at me inquisitively; for Dutihl was his nephew, and that I did not employ him he took as a personal slight.

"But you know why it is, Cauhapé. We have talked of it before."

"I know, I know. . . . You think he does not work cleverly. . . . You are wrong. Dutihl is a brave fellow. Will you not give him a chance the next time?"

"Is he young, the new curé?" I interrupted.

"Ah! you will not listen to me, and I am an old man. You are no different from all the other young men. What a pity it is that you are so obstinate. . . . The new curé, you ask? Yes, he is young. He is small of stature, too; he resembles the little priest who was at the château some years ago. . . . No, do not get up. I was just going to tell you the story. Dubois, M. le Baron's valet, told it me himself: it is a very strange story, and Dubois knew all about it. . . .

"It was from the seminary at Bayonne that M. le Baron brought the little priest, to teach young M. Paul Latin and Greek, and the other languages that people speak outside the frontier. He was quite small of stature, as I told you, and quite young, for his beard had not yet started to grow.

I remember he had a grave look on his little face, and large, dark eyes. They were queer sort of eyes. I never liked the look of them ; it seemed as if it was with them that he did all his thinking. He used to go by this door every morning on his way to matins, and in the afternoons, when M. le Baron and M. Paul were out riding, he used to walk for many kilometres along the road, reading studiously as he went. Dubois said that up at the château he was very timid, and spoke but seldom, and that in the evenings he would generally sit alone, in a corner, reading.

"Mademoiselle Claire used to tease him, and call him her petit curé, and then he would grow all red in the face, and Mlle. Claire would laugh at him. One evening, though, Madame la Baronne overheard her, and scolded her before every one, and after that, Mlle. Claire left him in peace ; but she would never speak to him or take any notice of him. But when Madame la Baronne's sister in Paris fell ill, and Madame la Baronne went away, and Mlle. de Castelner came to keep Mlle. Claire company, it all began over again.

"Perhaps Mlle. Claire meant no harm ; but Mlle. de Castelner was gay-hearted and very full of mischief, and, out of thoughtlessness, she set to work to make the little priest in love with her. Mon Dieu ! it was no difficult task, for she was beautiful as an angel ; her hair was golden like a new louis, and she always wore dazzling dresses like a great

lady. M. le Baron never noticed anything, for every day he was busy with his books ; but all the household knew of it. And no one dared presume to open his eyes. Soon the little priest took to writing long letters to Mlle. de Castelner, and in the afternoons, while he was walking along the roads by himself, Mlle. Claire and Mlle. de Castelner would sit under the big lime-tree in the garden, reading them, and making fun of them with peals of laughter.

“One day the little priest went out for his walk as usual, and when the dinner-hour came he never returned. And the next morning the postman brought M. le Baron a letter from him, saying that he was gone away, and could never come back again. There was a great upsetting of all the household, for M. le Baron is terrible when he is angry. He found out everything, and stormed much at Mlle. de Castelner, and sent her away out of the house. And he himself went by the morning train to Bayonne to look for the little priest. The next day the directeur of the seminary, as he was taking the young men for the promenade, met the little priest, dressed in ordinary clothes, like a young man of the town. And the little priest, when he saw the whole seminary coming towards him, ran under a doorway as if he were frightened. The directeur found him lying on the ground, crying for shame. And the directeur soothed him, and made him promise to come back to the

seminary in the evening. But the little priest broke his word ; and M. le Baron does not know to-day what has become of him.

“That is why I always say,” old Cauhapé concluded, “that none but old men should be priests. A young man in the soutane is an abomination.”

GASTON LALANNE'S CHILD

AS usual, before the coming of the spring, François Alivon left the country ; this time to make a road over at Hôpital d'Orion. He was to remain there two months, Marthe said, till the sowing of the maize, and then he would be gone to Mont-de-Marsan in the Landes, to help to build the new stone bull-ring, that was to cost a hundred thousand francs.

He was a rolling-stone, was François Alivon. In his time (though he was not an old man yet) he had seen much life and many cities. Years ago he had worked at the railway laying in Spain and Portugal, and afterwards he had become stoker of an express train, which crossed every night from Santander to Valladolid. In those days he had earned much money, and spent it too, in the gay Spanish towns.

But one night the express train ran over a bank, and many of the passengers were maimed and killed. And though François was in nowise to blame, the company judged that he had not suffi-

cient learning for a stoker's work. So he came back to Sallespisse, the commune where he was born. He was a shrewd fellow was François Alivon, and within the year he had married Marthe Durand, whose father was a rich peasant, and whose portion amounted to three thousand francs.

It was with her money that he had bought sixty arpents of land—fruitful, well-moistened land—down by the banks of the Luys, and upon it, with his own hands (for he was mighty skilful with his hands), he had built a house, he and Gaston Lalanne from Sault-de-Navailles, whom he had taken to work with him.

Marthe had given him three children—two boys, who were already at school, and a baby girl, and once more François Alivon earned much money, making roads for different communes, all over the department.

And at the Toussaint Gaston Lalanne had married Jacqueline, Marthe's sister, and with his savings, and her portion, he had taken a large *métairie* adjoining François' property. Every one agreed that it was a very pleasant arrangement for Marthe to have her sister settled so close to her own door, and Gaston to help her with the work; for François Alivon was a rolling-stone, and away during many months of the year.

Between Marthe and Jacqueline there was eight years disparity of age: they were very different to

look upon, yet, almost at the first glance, one could guess that they were sisters.

Marthe had turned thirty the summer before Gaston married. She was small and slim, brown-faced and flat-waisted, as are the peasant women of that country; quick of gesture, with a sharp intensity of speech. Before Jacqueline came to live in the commune, I had heard Anna, Eudore's wife, hint more than once that Marthe was overfond of Gaston Lalanne, and that François Alivon was perhaps not so clever after all. But Anna was an arrant scandal-monger, and now Gaston was married to Marthe's young sister.

They were a fine couple. Gaston had the strength of a heifer, and the burliest shoulders in all the village; and Jacqueline was so tall that she seemed made to match him. "Saperlotte! ils auront de beaux mioches!" Dutihl jested to Beyris the first Sunday that the Lalannes went up the hill together to mass.

Gaston, now that he was married, did things in a grand manner—kept two pairs of oxen and a servant, and every Tuesday drove his wife to the market at Orthez in a newly-varnished cart, with a fast-trotting chestnut mare. And if they asked him for news of little ones, he would smile and wink, and looking proudly at his wife, would answer, "Nous en ferons des tambour-majors."

But about the time that François Alivon left the commune to go to Hôpital d'Orion, Jacqueline

went less frequently into the town on market-days, for the first baby was on its way, and Gaston drove so fast that she feared the jolting of the cart. So it was Marthe who took her place by Gaston's side.

Gaston Lalanne was a fine fellow, and he was well aware of it. "*Faux et courtois*," runs the Béarnais maxim, and Gaston Lalanne, underneath his burly good-humour, knew that he was a bargainer, and a close man of business with the best of them. And if the women were ready with sly smiles for him, it was not his fault, he would say with a shrug of his heavy shoulders. Ever since he was a boy—the biggest boy in the communale school, of course—it had been his habit to do things better, on a bigger scale, than the rest, and so it was but natural that his wife should be the finest woman in the neighbourhood, that he should drive the smartest cart, and a mare whose trot the peasants turned to watch. And if Marthe was over-fond of him, that was not his fault either; for though no harm had ever passed between them, Gaston was quite aware how things stood with her. It was hard on her, certainly, he thought with easy pity, that she was left so much alone, and that he could not console her, being under obligations to her husband. Likewise, he accepted from her as natural all the little attentions which made his life agreeable during the time that he worked for François Alivon, and when Jacqueline came up

to Sallespisse, he courted her tranquilly under Marthe's eyes. But during the latter days of his courtship, there were not a few storms in the house, and Marthe grew full of ill-temper and bursts of rage, so that Gaston was heartily relieved when everything was satisfactorily settled.

Now that he had been married six months, and that the course of his life ran smoothly and altogether untroubled, he thought it good that Marthe should come often to help Jacqueline with the work ; for he was very eager that the baby should be fine and strong. And hence it was only natural that, in return, he should take her into Orthez on market-days, and no one could say there was harm in it now, for she was the sister of his wife.

Every Tuesday morning, then, they rattled along the road, and after they had done their business, they met at the Café Laborde, off the ox-market, and came home together in the cool of the late afternoon. Marthe was smartly dressed in a flaming red dress, and a silk handkerchief to match, around the coil of her hair, and the red looked beautiful against the brown of her skin. Gaston was often merry on these returns from the market, and would tell her long tales of the regiment and of his garrison days.

Anna, Eudore's wife, began to hint again that Jacqueline had better look to that hulking husband of hers ; but no one else thought there could be wrong between them, because Gaston was married to Marthe's sister.

One broiling July day, they were all splashing the vine-leaves with phosphate, and Jacqueline came out to tell them that the dinner was ready. Gaston shouted to her that they would be done directly ; that there remained only three furrows to finish, and turned to go into the house. All at once they heard her cry out, and Gaston called to her, but no answer came. They found her lying moaning by the hedge side : her foot had caught in a vine-wire. They carried her inside, and all the while she screamed with pain, so that the neighbours all came in to see what it was. Gaston hastened up to the village for the officier de santé, but before he could come the baby was born—a wailing, weakling of a child. The officier de santé said it could not live, and Marthe proposed sending for Monsieur le curé to baptize it. But Gaston grew all at once very angry with her, and swore he would shut his door in Monsieur le curé's face ; for the baby would live.

But the officier de santé was right after all, and it died before sundown. And Jacqueline's blood grew hotter and hotter, and she began to gibber about things which no one understood, like a woman talking in her sleep. Gaston sent the servant into Orthez to fetch out the doctor ; and then went out alone into the vineyard, leaving the women with Jacqueline in the house.

About ten o'clock Jacqueline grew worse, and the doctor said that Gaston must be fetched inside. It was Marthe who went for him : she found him

in the stable, sitting on a heap of ox-bedding, with his lantern all guttering on to the floor.

He came and followed her, though he looked as if he had not heard.

The clock had struck twelve for the second time when Jacqueline died. Gaston had gone to the well for a canful of fresh water, and when he came back she was lying all stiff and still.

He said not a word ; just stood by the door and let the can fall to the ground, so that the water all trickled in a stream under the bed. Then all the others went away, and Gaston and Marthe were left alone. Marthe knelt down by the bed and sobbed.

"Come," Gaston said roughly, "do not cry so loudly."

"It is terrible," Marthe went on sobbing
"Poor Jacqueline poor Jacqueline she was so good, poor Jacqueline."

Gaston paid no further heed to her ; he sat down by the dead body, staring at it stupidly.

"It is terrible," Marthe began again. "And I am a wicked woman. We have deceived her, poor Jacqueline who was so good What shall we do ? what shall we do ?"

"And the child the child the child is dead too I shall have no child" Gaston muttered to himself.

Marthe ceased her sobbing, so that there was a sudden stillness in the room.

"The child . . . the child is dead also," Gaston repeated. "It is all gone . . . I have nothing."

Marthe rose to her feet, and came close to him, and clutched the edge of his blouse so tight that the stitches tore.

"Gaston," she gasped, "Jacqueline's child is dead—but mine, I tell you, mine will live."

He remained still a moment, as if he had not understood; at last he stammered—

"What do you mean?"

Then it dawned upon him.

"It is not true. You lie, Marthe. Say that you lie."

"Before the Virgin, it is true."

He sank forward limply, and covered his face in his hands.

"Marthe," he said presently, in a whisper, "it is you that have killed Jacqueline; it is you that have killed my child. This is a judgment for our sin. The good God in heaven is revenged upon me."

After a while he added—

"Marthe, you have no right to be here. Quick, I say, get out of the house—quick—the sight of you makes me mad."

He gripped her wrist and threw her towards the door. She went out, crouching like a beaten animal.

And Gaston Lalanne was left alone to watch the body of his dead wife. Twenty minutes later he

went down-stairs, and finding Marthe standing in the doorway, gazing stupidly before her, touched her shoulder, saying—

“Come and hold the lantern for me, I must see to the Breton cow, who is in calf.”

1893—1895.

THE END

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